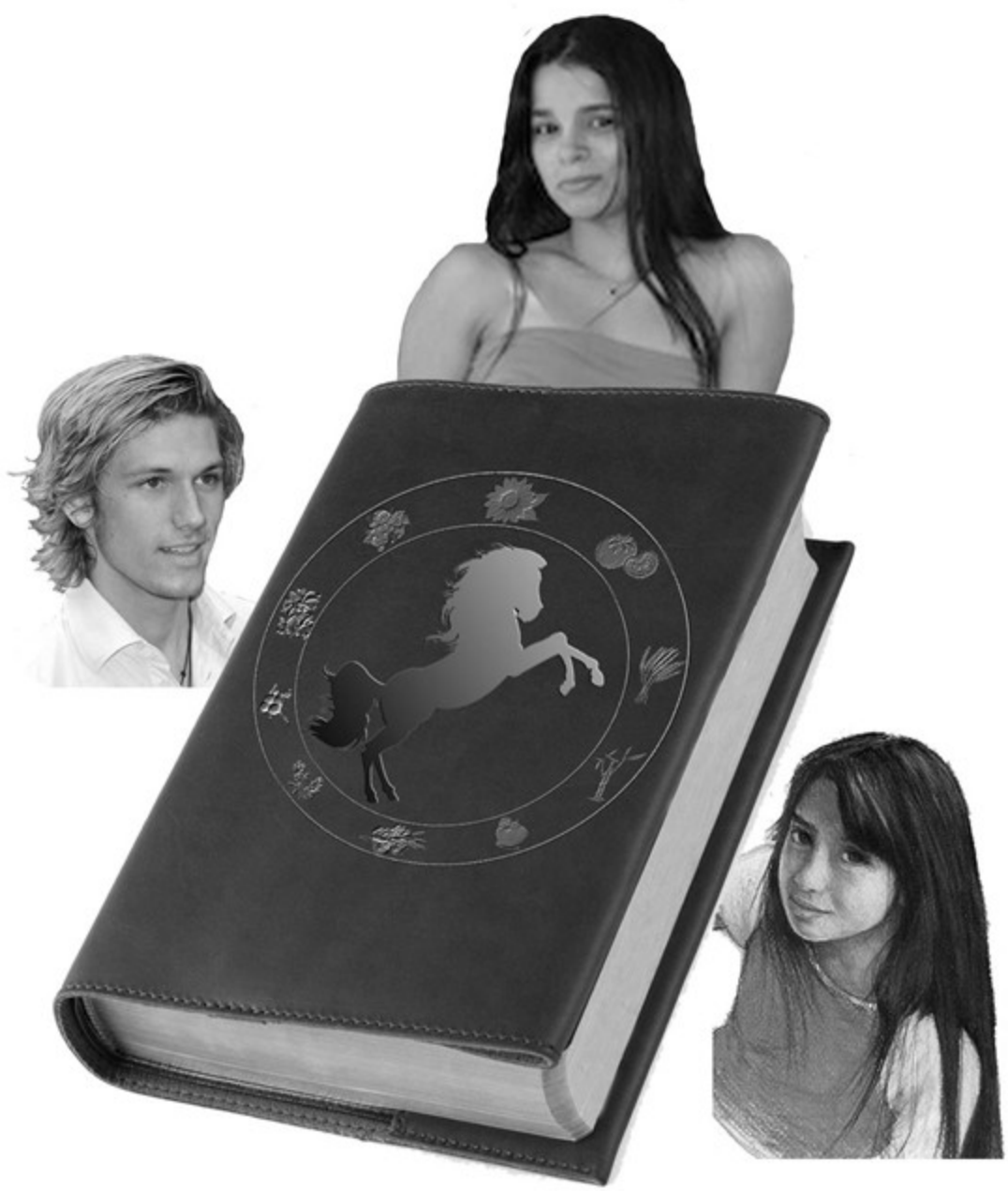
TEAL HAVEN

By Randi Beers



Chapter 1

Solana’s wide brim straw hat shaded her brown eyes but didn’t keep the sweat from running down the sides of her face. The hat’s leather cord dangled below her chin. It was a hot afternoon in Argentina with no clouds in the sky and only an occasional breeze. Solana’s horse was already soaked with sweat. She was glad she wore her light blue Coolsense shirt and Capri pants or she would be soaked with sweat too. Solana rode her brown and white spotted horse grumpily as she imagined her cousins having a great time swimming back at the pond. She pictured them splashing, laughing and relaxing in the cool water. Solana wished she could be swimming with them.

On the last Sunday of every summer month, the Gonzalez Family went on a three-hour horseback ride to a scenic overlook on the Sierra de Tandil mountain range in Buenos Aires Province for a late afternoon meal. Earlier that day, Solana tried to convince her mother, Esperanza, to let her stay home. Almost everyone else in the extended family had already explained to Esperanza that they didn’t want to go on the traditional family outing because it was too hot. Solana continued her argument while she helped her mother pack the bread, nuts, olives, and cheese for the meal.

“Mama, please let me stay home and swim,” Solana begged.

Esperanza explained to her daughter, “Traditions keep a family close and strong. I want you to learn to be a leader of your generation by doing what is right. When you do that, the rest will soon follow.”

“But it’s too hot out. It’s crazy to go out in this heat!” Solana blurted only to get a look from her mother. A look so powerful Solana decided it would be best not to say another word.

It was quiet except for the dogs panting heavily as they followed close behind Solana’s horse. Normally, there would be a large group of friends and family riding with them but today it was only four of them and three Dogo Argentino dogs. Esperanza’s chestnut-colored Criollo horse whinnied at some distant horses as they slowly made their way past a large ranch. The mountains in front of them were getting closer and the dirt road sloped gently upward. The grassy fields of the Pampas extended for miles to the north, south and east with almost no trees to offer shade from the burning sun.

Their largest male dog barked and snapped at the other dogs and then trotted up between Solana and Marina. Solana looked down to watch him trot by, his muscles flexing beneath his smooth white fur. The male dog’s tongue lolled out of his mouth, dripping with saliva. His smooth white fur was broken by a large black spot covering his left eye. He was the lead dog at the family ranch, and weighed about ninety-five pounds. The two female dogs stayed behind Solana. They growled and snapped at each other. Solana thought the heat must have them in a foul mood too.

Suddenly, Solana's horse snorted, stamped her back leg, and swooshed her white tail. Solana reached down to rub her horse's neck. "I know, the flies are bad," Solana whispered in her horse's ear, just loud enough for her mother to hear. There seems to be more insects this summer than ever, Solana thought. They must be angry about the heat too, since they're biting harder than ever. She brushed a fly off her cheek and quickly flicked another one that had landed on her hand. As Solana battled against the insects, she glanced over at her grandmother. Marina rode with her back straight and her sun-wrinkled face held high, completely ignoring the swarms of biting insects. Solana looked at her father and saw the sweat soaking through the back of his white cotton short-sleeve shirt. He was swatting at the flies that buzzed around him. At least Papa is normal, thought Solana, but he should have worn Coolsense clothing. Solana remembered how he complained about the tight stretchy material.

The road turned northwestward so that a strip of trees along the road created some much-needed shade. A breeze blew from the mountains and Solana closed her eyes and tilted her head back to enjoy the cool air. Solana's silky dark brown hair rippled in the breeze. Solana's hair was just long enough to drape across her shoulders. When she opened her eyes, she noticed a small girl come out from behind a tree while kicking a soccer ball. The girl was wearing shorts and a striped soccer jersey. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Solana watched the girl practice dribbling her soccer ball while weaving in and out of the trees. Then she

kicked the ball through two trees. The girl hollered out in joy as she hopped up with her arms held high. Solana's horse was startled from the girl's celebration. She raised her head, whinnied and turned her body to face the girl. The girl stopped and turned around to look at Solana and her horse.

"Easy, shhhh," Solana comforted her horse.

"Can I pet her?" the girl asked as she stepped forward.

Immediately, the two female dogs charged in front of Solana's horse, growling at the girl with their tails raised high. The girl's eyes widened with fear as she stepped back, tripped over a tree root, and landed on her butt. The dogs stopped growling as if satisfied that the girl wasn't a threat.

Esperanza shouted, "Come!" calling the female dogs.

The dogs obediently ran to follow behind the rest of the group as they continued toward the mountains. The girl got back to her feet and brushed the dirt off her shorts. Solana dismounted and held her horse by the reins.

"What is your name?" Solana asked.

The girl replied, "Rosita."

"This is Sunflower Magic. She is a Tobiano Pinto."

The girl approached with a big smile on her face. She reached up and petted Sunflower Magic's muzzle.

In the distance behind Rosita, Solana noticed a herd of guanacos. They jumped a cattle fence and frantically ran towards the mountains as if being chased by a puma. There were five of the light brown animals, which she thought looked like small llamas. Solana looked behind them to see

what was chasing them. She'd never seen a wild puma and had wondered if she would see one today. She didn’t see anything chasing the guanacos.

“I like her brown spots,” Rosita said while she petted Solana’s horse. “Thank you,” said Solana thinking Rosita must be about nine or ten years old. She glanced at her family, who was already getting some distance away from her. “I better go now.”

Solana got back on her horse and gently squeezed her legs to get her horse trotting down the road. She turned and waved goodbye to Rosita. What a cute little girl, Solana thought as she watched Rosita smile and wave back. Solana’s horse quickly caught up to the family, so Solana pulled back slightly on the reins to slow to a walk. Marcos' horse was startled by Solana’s sudden arrival and he lifted his head in alarm and bolted. At once, all four horses were galloping out of control and the dogs were barking and running full speed up the road. They all pulled back on the reins.

“Whoa!” they shouted in unison.

Esperanza’s horse stopped so forcefully that Solana’s horse almost ran into him. Solana’s horse turned slightly and stopped, brushing up against Esperanza’s horse’s haunch. Marcos and Marina’s horses continued at a canter for several more feet until they were able to stop them, too. The dogs continued to run up the road and around a corner out of sight.

“Is everyone OK?” Marcos shouted looking back.

“Yes, we seem to be fine,” Esperanza said after glancing at Solana.

Esperanza nudged her horse into a walk and Solana followed. They joined Marcos and Marina and once again headed up the increasingly steep road towards the mountain peak.

“The animals have gone crazy,” said Marcos as he began to whistle for the dogs, but there was no sign of them.

Marina replied, “I’m sure the dogs will be waiting for us at the overlook when we get there.”

Marcos said, “It’s not like them to run off like that. Maybe the heat is getting to them.”

Solana thought her horse was still tense. She reached down to rub her horse’s neck. Her horse repeatedly lifted and dropped her head in sharp, quick movements, anxiously prancing in place. She held her head high and turned her ears as if trying to hear something behind her. Solana turned around to see what she was hearing. Solana saw nothing on the road behind them. Many people were usually traveling on the road since it was a very popular recreational area. However, it was so hot she wasn’t surprised to see it empty. She turned back around and tried to calm her horse.

Esperanza turned around and asked, “Do you need help, Solana?”

“I’m not sure. She seems spooked.” Solana said.

Solana’s horse gave a high-pitched whinny, throwing back her long white mane as she turned around completely backwards. She reared up, lifting her front legs high as she loudly whinnied again. Solana had no trouble staying on her horse. Her mother proudly told everyone that Solana

had been riding horses since before she could walk. As Solana's horse dropped back down, Solana saw it. Her eyes widened as she slowly realized what she was seeing. That cannot be right, she thought. She stared in disbelief, saying, "What is that?" She knew what it was, though. A giant wall of water was crushing its way across the land at an incredible speed.

"We have to get out of here!" shouted Marcos as he kicked his horse into a full gallop towards the mountain. Esperanza and Marina's horses immediately took off for the mountains as if someone smacked them in the rear.

"Solana!" Esperanza shouted.

Solana was holding her horse's reins tight, keeping her from running. The little girl will drown, Solana thought. She wasn't that far down the road, and Solana kicked her horse into a full gallop toward the wave.

Esperanza screamed, "Solana, no!" She tried to stop her horse but he wouldn't respond.

Solana's hat flew off her head and hung on her back as she rode her horse down the road. Solana focused on the strip of trees, looking for the girl. The wave was close enough to see the debris churning in the water. Solana could hear the loud crunching and snapping sounds as the wave crushed a house into bits of broken debris. She thought it might be Rosita's house and wondered if she was in there. Then Solana saw the girl running along the edge of the road. Solana felt a surge of adrenaline as she realized she had a chance to save Rosita.

She smacked her horse’s hindquarter as she yelled, “Yaw!”

The wave plowed into the strip of trees. She was getting close to Rosita and could hear her screaming. Solana leaned to one side of her horse, preparing to grab the girl. She saw the fear in Rosita’s eyes as the wave grabbed at her feet.

“Pleaseeeee,” Rosita cried out as she stretched out her arms toward Solana.

Solana reached for her but wasn’t close enough. The wave’s sharp fangs and grey foam swallowed Rosita.

“No!” Solana screamed as her horse instinctively wheeled around. Solana nearly flew off her horse and into the killer wave that was licking at her horse’s tail. Somehow, she managed to hold on as her horse bolted with a jump away from the wave. The wave couldn’t catch Sunflower Magic as she galloped toward the mountain. Solana was in shock as tears ran down her face and she wrapped her arms around her horse’s neck and closed her eyes.

Chapter 2

Solana quickly sat up in bed and looked around. She rubbed her eyes and blinked. Realizing she was in her Cousin Jose's bedroom, she tried to relax. Dim sunlight shone in through the dark curtains. It had been almost four and half years since the flood, yet she still had nightmares about it. She felt a small kick in her belly. Solana smiled as she placed her hand on her abdomen and looked down at her growing belly. "I love you, my little jelly bean," Solana said.

Solana slowly got up and put on her khaki capri's and a rose-colored maternity shirt. Solana picked up her beige canvas shoes and noticed one shoe had a tear between the sole and the canvas. She didn't know how to fix it, so she sat down and slipped them on her feet anyway. She needed to tend to her horse. Solana walked into the kitchen and saw that breakfast was already growing cold as Esperanza and Marina cleaned up the kitchen. They didn't scold her for sleeping in and missing breakfast.

"Happy birthday Solana," Esperanza said with a big smile as she gave her daughter a hug. She grabbed her daughter's shoulders and gently pushed her back to look at her face and said, "My little girl already 20 years old. I can hardly believe it." She placed her hand on Solana's belly and asked, "How is the little baby?"

"She is doing great Mama! She is kicking me so much," Solana said with pride.

“I think your baby is going to be a boy. Look how low you’re carrying. That baby is a boy,” Marina said while carefully studying Solana. Marina took Solana gently by the hand and led her to the table. “Sit and eat. You need to take care of yourself.”

Solana quickly replied, “But, I need to take care of the horses.”

“Don’t be silly, this is your birthday," Esperanza said. "You deserve a day off from your chores. Besides, your father already took the horses out for grazing. We told him not to wake you. You need your rest.”

“Oh Mama, you’re too nice,” Solana said and began to eat a pastry with jam. “Where is Aunt Irene?” Solana asked.

“She is taking care of her son, David. He is not doing well.” Esperanza said. Then she lowered her voice to a whisper and said, “It looks like he has Saprosia Virus.”

Just then, Irene walked into the kitchen, went to the sink, and washed her hands. They watched her without saying a word. Her head slumped down and she started crying. Esperanza walked to her side and put her arm around Irene.

Esperanza said, trying to comfort her sister-in-law, “He’s going to be all right, Irene. The men are planning to take another trip off the mountain today to find him some medicine.”

Irene barely squeaked out between sobs, “He’s delirious and his fingers and toes are black.”

Solana felt devastated. Only two days ago, David had been out riding horses with her. He tried to get Solana to race. When she refused to race, he teased her about being fat and slow. She had scolded him and told him to grow up. He was only 12 years old. Solana wished she hadn't scolded him. Her boyfriend, Alex Sanchez, had died from Saprosia Virus last December. She thought about how black his arms and legs had become. It made her sick to her stomach. She hadn't vomited for months and didn't want to start again so she drove the image out of her mind. Alex was very sick and bedridden when she realized her menstruation was late. She tried to tell him she was pregnant but the virus had already taken his mind. Then she had to tell her parents about the pregnancy. They had given her such a hard time about accidentally becoming pregnant. The lectures went on for nearly two months before they finally warmed up to the idea that they were going to be grandparents. Besides, Solana thought, Alex would have asked her to marry him if he hadn't died. Solana put her hands on her belly and cried. She wouldn't lose her baby like that. She vowed to find a way to protect her baby. She could no longer eat, so she wiped the tears from her eyes and got up to clear the table.

Solana went out the front door and saw one of her family's dogs standing on the front porch, looking at Solana and wagging her tail. Solana petted her, and sat down on a rocking chair. She watched as her cousins Lukas and Jose walked by. Lukas, a sixteen-year-old boy, was almost as tall as the brown llama he was leading to the barn. Jose, his eight-year-old

brother, followed closely beside him. She felt bad for them since they didn't yet know David had the virus. She didn't want to be the one to tell them, so she looked away when they glanced in her direction. Solana looked out at the Sierra de Famatina mountain peaks to her left. She watched her uncle's windmills as they slowly turned in the breeze. They were lucky her uncle's farm wasn't too far away. They only had to travel to the northwestern corner of Argentina to get here. She missed her home at the ranch and the beautiful sunflower fields. She even enjoyed the hard work of harvesting sunflower seeds for oil. She never really liked helping her family with the cattle. That was one chore she didn't miss at all. Solana knew she could never return to her home. The flood never receded, and most of the grassy Pampas including the capital city, Buenos Aires, had become part of the sea. She imagined her bedroom had barnacles on the walls, with a school of small fish swimming around. No, Solana changed the image in her mind to visualize her clothes covered with mud drifting in the tidal currents. Since, she thought, her house was probably completely smashed from the tsunami. She visualized all of her belongings strewn across the sea floor.

It had all started about a year before the flood. Her mother and father gathered the family for an emergency meeting.

Marcos told everyone, "We just heard on the news that one of the large carbon dioxide storage facilities had a sudden failure. It was the Murray-Darling saline aquifer in Australia that failed."

“We still need to store carbon dioxide?” asked Esperanza’s younger brother.

Esperanza answered her brother, “Yes, there are natural sources and some factories still generate carbon dioxide. Plus, what was created during the age of oil burners is still in storage.”

Solana asked, “What is a saline aquifer?”

“It’s a natural underground formation that holds water," Marcos explained. "The rocks in some areas act like a big sponge. Years ago, the government discovered they could store a lot of carbon dioxide in those underground water basins.”

Esperanza said, “People in Australia said the ground trembled, cracked, and carbon dioxide rushed out of the ground in massive geysers.”

Marcos added, “They estimate about twelve hundred gigatonnes of carbon dioxide escaped into the atmosphere.”

“What will happen?” one of Solana’s cousins asked.

Marcos said, “There might be an increase in temperature until the carbon dioxide levels are brought back down. The government is planning immediate construction of additional carbon dioxide atmospheric scrubbing towers to clean the air faster. They’re still investigating what caused the Darling Basin to fail. But I’m sure they will find an answer soon.”

Esperanza said, “Just to be safe, we need to fill our cellars with extra food and supplies. Lord knows how people panic.”

All that work storing extra food, and it was lost. They were able to save nothing. It happened so fast. If they hadn't been on horseback, the flood would have taken them too. They were able to reach high ground only to find the dogs waiting for them just as Marina had predicted. They waited all night in hopes the water would recede. It never did.

Solana could hardly believe it was the twenty-fourth day of July and she was sitting outside wearing her summer clothes. She thought it should be cold and snowing since it was the middle of winter. A sudden gust of wind blew from the valley below and carried with it the smell of sulfur. Solana wrinkled her nose and covered her mouth with her hands. She got up and went back inside.

"The rotten eggs smell is getting worse, Mama," Solana told her mother when she saw her heading for the front door.

"I know dear. We might have to move to higher ground soon," Esperanza told her daughter as she walked past. "I have work to do. We can talk more later."

Solana quickly asked, "How is Aunt Irene?"

"Not good," Esperanza said as she walked out the door.

Quietly Solana glanced into the living room and saw Irene and Marina sipping yerba mate tea and talking. Solana thought Aunt Irene looked a little better now. She walked to the family room and sat down in front of her Uncle Ramiro's computer. Solana logged onto Yahoo! News hoping to find

out why the sulfur smell was getting worse. Solana quickly found the information she was looking for:

Hydrogen Sulfide, H_2S, is upwelling from the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It is heavier than air and is filling the world's valleys and lowlands. The rate of emission appears to be increasing. About seventy-five percent of Atlantic and Pacific Oceans have entered into an anoxic condition. These anoxic zones of seawater have hydrogen sulfide bubbling up from the depths. The anoxic zones also appear to be growing and increasing in hydrogen sulfide production.

Anyone still alive needs to evacuate to high elevations immediately. If entering a low-lying area is necessary, use a full-face gas mask. In many areas, the concentration of H_2S is high enough to cause blindness and death.

Solana sat and stared at the news article. "The world is flooding with poison," she said to herself. Solana had thought the poison would be going away soon, but she realized it was going to continue to rise. First water flooded her home, and now poison was flooding the rest of the world. She shivered in fear. She wrapped her arms around herself and shrunk down into the chair, looking down at the floor. Gas masks were stacked up against the wall. Her uncle procured them from the gold mine where he used to work. There was also a meter used to measure poisonous gases. Looking at them didn't help her mood so she looked back at the computer. That is when she noticed the banner at the top of the page. She hadn't seen an

advertisement banner in years. So many people had died that only a few web pages on the entire World Wide Web were still functioning. Governments and companies completely disappeared. Yet there it was, a banner blinking at her. Solana almost dismissed it since she grew up learning to ignore banner ads that flashed all over the internet. She read the banner.

Do you want to Survive? Save your family from a dying world? Click here

Solana curiously clicked the banner. She read the next page as it loaded.

Do you want to Survive?

Be a hero and save your family and friends?

Start your life over in a new paradise?

Enter the free lottery. Only thirty winners will be selected.

Winners may choose up to six people to bring with them.

Deadline to enter: Midnight on July 24

-Click here to enter lottery-

Project: Teal Haven

Solana wasn’t sure what to do. She read it again. There were no pictures, just a plain text web page. She couldn’t find any links to explain the details. She wondered if Teal Haven was the name of the place. She did

a quick search for Teal Haven and found a few hits but no large city or anything that might make sense. She decided it didn't matter since this was the last day to enter. She had been too busy to use the computer for months. She rubbed her belly, thought of holding her baby, and remembered her vow to her unborn child. She clicked on the link and entered the lottery.

After that, Solana spent most of the day relaxing and helping with household chores. Later that evening, Solana went to the kitchen to help Irene prepare dinner. Solana noticed they were almost completely out of food.

"What will we eat for dinner?" Solana asked.

"We have bread and there's some cured bacon in the frig," Irene said as she pulled a loaf of bread from the upper cabinet. "Solana, please set a couple of burners on the table. We can cook chunks of bacon over the burners and catch the grease with the bread. We can't afford to waste anything." Irene took the bacon out of the refrigerator, paused, then looked at Solana and continued, "I wish Ramiro and your father would return from their scavenging trip. I sure hope they find some medicine and more food. They also took Lukas with them this time for extra help."

"I wish I could go with them. I want to help," Solana said.

"In your condition, Solana, it's too dangerous. Besides, I need your help since David is so sick."

Esperanza came into the kitchen and announced, “They have returned and they found some medicine that might help David. But only a few cans of food.” After a moment of frowning she continued, “They did find some weapons -- a shotgun and a crossbow.”

Irene mockingly said as she smiled looking relieved about the medicine, “Great, leave it to men to find weapons. At least no one will harm us while we starve to death.” Solana thought Irene looked terribly tired, with dark circles under her eyes.

Marcos, Ramiro, and Lukas entered the kitchen. Ramiro was holding the shotgun. Lukas was holding the crossbow, lifting it high as Jose excitedly tried to grab for it.

“I heard that, Irene,” Ramiro said teasingly. “We can also use these weapons to hunt.”

“I know, but they make me nervous,” Irene said.

Ramiro replied as he handed Irene a small bottle of medicine, “I hope this helps, it’s all we could find.”

Irene took the bottle and left.

Solana gestured at the table, “It’s time to eat.”

Everyone sat down at the table. They passed the slab of bacon around, cutting off small cubes. They also passed the loaf of bread around, taking turns tearing off chunks. Solana put her bacon on a long fork and held it over the flames. When her bacon began to drip, she pulled it away from the flames to let the grease drip on her bread. When the bacon stopped

dripping, she put it back above the flames to continue cooking it. Solana took a bite of her bread while she cooked her bacon. Solana liked the taste of the bread softened and warmed by the bacon grease. After her bacon was crispy, she ate it and got another chunk. When Irene returned to join the family, Solana decided she should tell everyone about the lottery.

“There was a banner ad on Yahoo! News today. It said there is some kind of new paradise called Teal Haven. It’s a safe place to live. Only you had to enter a lottery to get a chance to live there. Only thirty families of seven will win.”

Esperanza was quick to reply, “That sounds like some kind of gimmick. I hope you didn’t enter, Solana.”

“Yes, I did enter. I think it’s for real. If I win we will have a place to move to.”

Marcos asked, “What information did you have to give when you entered the lottery?”

Solana answered her father, “My name, address, and email address. That’s it.”

Marcos replied, “That’s it! Solana, there are people out there who would kill us and steal everything we have and you gave them our address? They could be looking for survivors to pillage. You should have asked us before you gave out information like that!”

“Oh,” Solana said, feeling foolish.

Ramiro added, “We should pack everything we can and leave tomorrow.”

Lukas asked, “Did you say seven, Solana? Only seven people can go if you win?”

Solana answered Lukas while trying to ignore the panicked adults, “Yes, that is what it said. I don’t know why.”

“So, who are you planning to take?” Lukas asked Solana.

“I don’t know. I thought we’d all go and then explain to them that we have a big family. I think they can’t be that strict. What is the big deal letting two extra people in?”

“Where is this paradise?” Marina asked.

“It didn’t say.”

Ramiro shouted at Solana, “See, it must be a hoax, there is no such paradise. What have you gotten us into, Solana? Your stupidity is going to get us all killed!”

A lump rose into Solana’s throat as she tried to keep from crying. She'd just been trying to help. It has to be real, she thought. It’s our only hope.

“Don’t you speak to my daughter like that, Ramiro,” Esperanza said with a stern look. “You need to calm down. We were planning to move to a higher elevation anyway.”

“But David is sick. We can’t move him so soon,” Irene said sounding concerned.

Marcos said sternly, “Solana, you should have asked me first.”

Esperanza stood up and said “Please, everyone calm down. Let us not be so quick to judge the situation. Please, shall we finish our meal in peace and have another talk about this in the morning after we sleep on it?”

“I hope you win, Solana.” Jose said quietly as he bit off a piece of bread.

Everyone began to eat again and nothing more was said about it. Solana kept herself from crying as she ate her bread. She knew in her heart that Teal Haven was real. After a short period of time, everyone seemed to calm down and cheer up.

After they finished eating, Esperanza handed Solana a colorful bag with a ribbon on it. Marcos also pulled a colorful bag out from under the table and handed it to Solana.

Solana was surprised as she took the gifts, smiled, and said, “Thank you.”

“Happy birthday,” everyone said.

“Sorry about yelling at you Solana,” Ramiro said. “I guess you don’t know what it’s like out there. It has gotten really bad since the sulfide started to pollute the air last November.”

“That’s OK, Uncle Ramiro,” Solana said as she smiled at him. Solana tried not to show her frustration. It was their fault she didn’t know what was going on. They have been treating her like some kind of frail child since the flood.

Solana opened the bag her mother gave her first.

Inside the gift bag was a pink backpack, which she thought looked cute but a little childish.

Noticing Solana's expression, Esperanza said, "Open it."

Solana opened the backpack and found several little baby outfits, cloth diapers, baby pins, and a crocheted baby blanket. "Aww, they're so adorable!" she said.

"Your grandmother made the blanket and I sewed the clothes," Esperanza said.

"Thank you so much!"

Then Solana opened the bag her father gave her. She pulled out a pair of shoes with a light metallic sheen. The shoes looked like a cross between hiking boots and running shoes.

"Moon Shoes!" I can't believe it!" Solana exclaimed. "Where did you find them?"

Marcos shook his head, "You don't want to know."

Solana looked at him and decided he was right. She took off her canvas shoes and slipped her feet into the moon shoes.

"They fit!" she said. She wiggled her toes and thought they felt like pillows wrapped around her feet.

Jose moved in closer and said, "Turn them on, Solana! Let's see if they work." Lukas looked jealous as he stayed in his chair pretending not to be

interested. Ramiro noticed this and said, “Sorry boys, but we decided Solana should have them since she is pregnant.”

Solana reached down to press the crescent shaped button on the tip of the shoe’s tongue but she hesitated holding her hand over the button.

“Is it safe?” she asked.

Jose pressed his hand against Solana’s fingers, forcing her to push the button. A light zipped around the soles of the moon shoes and went out. Solana stood afraid to move.

“I don’t feel anything,” Solana said as she looked up at everyone.

“You have to move. Don’t you know that, Solana?” Lukas said with a mocking intonation.

Solana took a small step. Her face brightened with a large smile. She took a few more steps and giggled.

“This is so cool,” she told everyone. “I feel like I’m walking on a cloud.”

“Try to jump, Solana,” Jose said.

Solana looked at Jose and decided to try a small jump. She instantly flew about a foot off the kitchen floor and gently landed back down. Solana laughed.

“Looks like the low-gravity unit still works,” said Marcos.

“Can I try them?” Jose asked.

“Sure, Jose, but they might be a little big for you,” Solana said as she held the table to sit down. “Thank you,” she said as she took off the moon shoes. She handed them to Jose, who anxiously grabbed them.

Solana felt tired and achy. She was thirty-seven weeks pregnant and exhausted. The books she read about pregnancy told her she would feel tired in the third trimester but this was beyond tired. Solana was glad it was almost time for her baby to be born. She was so ready to hold her baby and have her body back. She forced a smile as she watched Jose try to walk in the oversized moon shoes. She shifted her weight in the hard-wooden chair, trying to find a comfortable way to sit.

“You look tired, Solana,” Marina said. “Why don’t you go to bed?”

“Good idea, Grandmamma. I think I will,” Solana said as she got up to leave. “Goodnight and thank you.” Solana glanced at the clock hanging on the kitchen wall. It was already eleven thirty, which meant the drawing for the lottery would happen soon. She wondered if she would win as she walked into Jose’s bedroom, which was now her room, and went to bed.

Chapter 3

Solana woke up and headed for the bathroom. The house was dark and quiet. She put her hand on the small of her back and rubbed it. Solana knew her belly was getting quite big. She rubbed it, trying to feel for her baby. She thought she could feel a head at the bottom of her belly. No wonder she had to use the bathroom so much, she thought. Luckily, her bedroom was right next to the bathroom. After leaving the bathroom, she headed to the kitchen for a snack. Solana wondered if she would find anything to eat. Her bare feet didn't make a sound as she walked across the carpeted family room floor. Solana saw a chunk of bread wrapped in clear plastic sitting on the kitchen table. She smiled, knowing her family had intentionally left her the bread. She imagined her mother had kept the hungry boys from devouring every edible morsel.

She glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was four o'clock in the morning. Then she remembered the lottery. Anxiously, she headed for the computer in the family room. She sat down, still nibbling on the bread and turned on the computer. She opened her email, and saw there was one unread email in her Inbox. Solana could feel her heart pounding. She wondered if it was from the Teal Haven people. She thought it had to be from them. She needed it to be from them. She clicked the link to open her Inbox.

The subject read, “Please Read, Do Not Delete.” Solana’s shoulders drooped and she sat back. She thought it looked like the old junk emails that used to fill her Inbox, but the sender’s email address, jpalmer@fcafb.com, looked real. Solana opened the email and read it.

Congratulations Solana Gonzalez!

You are one of thirty winners!

- Please click here for more details-

Project: Teal Haven

Solana excitedly screamed aloud and quickly put her hands over her mouth to stop herself. She looked behind her and down the hall towards the bedrooms and held her breath to listen. The house remained silent. Solana relaxed again and turned around to click on the link.

A web page quickly appeared as Solana began to read it.

Welcome Solana Gonzalez

You must complete *three steps before you and your chosen six family members can gain access to your new home.*

They are as follows:

1. *Choose an animal from our approved list.*
2. *Sign and abide by The Constitution.*
3. *Receive a key, which will be implanted in your right-hand thumbnail.*

You will receive a location after all three steps are complete. All families must meet at this location no later than noon on the twelfth day of

August. The location will be abandoned after said date and time. No information of final location will be available. This is for the protection of all winning families.

- Please click here to begin step one -

Solana wondered why she had to choose an animal. Was the animal a family mascot? Solana thought the lottery seemed authentic. Solana reasoned that if they wanted to steal from her family, they wouldn't have sent out emails to notify the winners. She decided to continue with the process and clicked on the link to begin step one.

Step one

Choosing a designated animal

You will be responsible *for bringing at least two pairs of your designated animals. The pairs must be healthy and capable of breeding immediately or at maturity. To continue please select an animal from the list below.*

- *Alpaca*
- *Chicken*
- *Dog - guarding breed*
- *Dog - herding breed*
- *Dog - hunting dog breed*
- *Domestic Camel*
- *Domestic Cat*
- *Domestic Duck or Goose*

- *Domestic Goat*
- *Domestic Pig*
- *Domestic Pigeon*
- *Domestic Rabbit*
- *Domestic Turkey*
- *Donkey or Mule*
- *Elephant*
- *Elk*
- *Emu*
- *Falconry Bird of Prey*
- *Fallow Deer*
- *Guinea Pig*
- *Horse - draft or heavy breeds*
- *Horse - stock breeds*
- *Horse - versatile and hardy breeds*
- *Llama*
- *Moose*
- *Ostrich*
- *Reindeer*
- *Sheep*

After reading the list, she understood that they wanted people to bring animals that could help people survive, although some of them

seemed a little strange. She wasn’t sure how a moose would be useful. She shrugged away the thought since she figured it didn’t matter. She knew right away which animal she wanted to bring. If she were going to bring any animal with her, it would be her horse, Sunflower Magic. Her horse was a birthday present for her fifteenth birthday. Solana remembered how amazing her coming of age party had been. Her mother made her the most beautiful long and sparkling white dress she had ever seen. Her family had even hired a rock band. There had been so many people and tons of food. She received many wonderful gifts. Then it was time to dance the waltz with her father. She thought he was crazy when he led her off the dance floor and toward the side of the house while everyone watched. That is when she saw her horse, a beautiful Tobiano foal. She was so surprised and instantly fell in love with her new horse. She will never forget that day. She clicked on "horse – versatile and hardy breeds" and in a few moments, a new web page appeared.

Your animal choice of Horse – versatile and hardy breeds has been accepted.

PLEASE WAIT

Calculating your list of seeds and/or plants based on your location and other factors.

Solana was surprised to read that she also needed to bring seeds and plants. Solana wondered why this had to be so complicated.

“I guess nothing is free after all,” Solana whispered to herself.

Your list of seeds *and plants has been generated. You must bring enough seeds and/or plants of the following list to ensure the species survival.*

- *Sunflower*
- *Alfalfa*
- *Oat*
- *Olive tree*
- *Grape*
- *Cotton*
- *Sugarcane*
- *Tomato*
- *Apple tree*
- *Yerba mate tree*

-Please click here to continue with step two-

Solana thought it was crazy that she had to bring horses and seeds. It sounded so difficult with the way things are now. Back at her family ranch, it would have been easy to find sunflower seeds. They'd had no time to pack sunflower seeds when the ranch was flooded. The world is dying, how can anyone find healthy plants and animals, she wondered. She felt her baby kick her ribs and she looked down at her belly. She strengthened her resolve, and clicked the link for step two.

“I will find a way!” Solana whispered to her baby.

Step two

Signing the Constitution

You must read and *sign the Constitution thus by agreeing to follow all laws. Violators will be punished by the decision of a jury.*

-Turn on your transprinter and click here to receive the Constitution-

Solana reached over to the right of the computer and pressed the power button on the front of the transprinter. Then she clicked on the link. Solana stood up to see the screen of the transprinter better. It was like a pyramid with a flat TV screen lying on its back for the base. Four rectangular beams rose up from each corner of the screen and met in the center about two hands above the screen. Solana saw the image of a thin book in the center of the screen. At the inside top of the pyramid, a light glowed. Solana watched as more spots of light formed under each beam about halfway down. Slowly, the lights swirled downward and towards the center. The lights blended to form a 3D image of the book, hovering slightly above the screen. She blocked the light from her eyes as it glowed brighter and brighter. When the light dimmed, Solana looked at the transprinter and saw a thin brown book. She picked it up. It had a hard cover with “The Constitution” written on the cover. She opened the book. Inside, the pages were a light tan color and felt like cloth. There were five pages of laws and at the bottom of the fifth page was a place for signatures. She noticed there

were already three signatures. She sat down at the computer desk and began to read.

Solana's eyelids quickly became heavy as she struggled to read law after law. None of the laws seemed out of the ordinary to her. She nodded her head, agreeing with the laws against murder and stealing. She was happy to read the many laws written to protect the freedom of each individual. Solana especially liked the laws written to protect the natural environment. After reading all of the constitution, she felt good about the content. Solana got up to find a pen. She went into the kitchen and opened a drawer that had several pencils and pens. She grabbed a pen with green ink, thinking it would send a nice message to start again with a new green home. She glanced at the clock and couldn't believe it was already five thirty in the morning. Her parents would be waking up soon. She needed to finish before they could stop her. She was going to this new paradise even if she had to go without them, but she was hoping they would decide to go with her. Solana returned to the computer and opened the book to the fifth page. She signed her name under Joshua Palmer's signature. She wondered who Joshua was. Solana closed the book and placed it back on the transprinter. Solana looked at the computer screen.

- After signing, place the book on the transprinter and click here –

Solana clicked the link and the transprinter began to work. The book became swirls of light that slowly disappeared. Then Solana realized she should have made a copy of it. She also realized she had forgotten to write down the list of seeds and plants. She tried to remember the list. Let's see, she thought, there were sunflowers, grapes, apples, yerba mate trees, and something else. Solana knew there was more but she couldn't remember the rest of the list. She put her elbows on the desk and covered her face with her hands as she groaned. How stupid, she thought. She hoped there would be a summary page or some kind of receipt she could print. She had to continue to find out so she clicked on the link to go to step three.

Step Three

Receiving the key

You will now receive *a key to your new home. This will allow us to discreetly identify you as a winner when you arrive on location.*

First, enter an accurate *measurement of the diameter of your right-hand thumb at the midpoint of your thumbnail in the box below.*

Thumb Diameter around the thumbnail in millimeters: _____

Next, place your thumb in the center of the transprinter. Position your thumb so the middle of your thumbnail is in the exact center of the screen and facing directly up not angled. Note: Most transprinters have grid marks on the screen. Use these marks to help position your thumb. You may feel a slight pinch as the key is implanted into your thumbnail. DO NOT move or remove your hand while the transprinter is operating.

- Click here when ready to implant key -

Solana couldn’t believe she had to put her hand in the transprinter while it was printing. She'd heard of stories where people had lost their fingers or even hands. Solana knew transprinters couldn’t transport organics. They converted everything into inorganic material. Any body parts transported to another location couldn’t be saved or reattached. She heard it was similar to a laser cut, so no one bled to death afterwards. Solana remembered that all the accidents happened while sending something to another location, not receiving it. She had no choice but to trust them. She reached under the desk, turned on the 3D scanner, and put her hand into it. Soon a three-dimensional image of her right hand appeared on the computer screen. She used the computer to measure the image of her thumb. Solana thought that should be accurate enough and entered 11.3 into the box. She got up to place her thumb in the transprinter. She shook with fear as she placed her thumb in the center of the transprinter’s screen. She reached for the mouse with her left hand. The cursor shook all over the

screen, but Solana managed to line it up with the link to start the transprinter.

“For you, my child,” Solana said, no longer caring to whisper.

Solana clicked on the link. She turned her head away and squeezed her eyes shut. After a few moments of feeling nothing, she opened her eyes and looked at the transprinter. She saw the swirls of light gathering around her thumbnail and thought this wasn't so bad. Solana smiled and relaxed a little since she knew it was almost finished. Slowly the small light in her thumbnail became brighter and Solana felt a pinch. She frowned as the pinch grew in intensity to a piercing pain. Solana moaned as the pain increased and beads of sweat formed on her forehead. Instinctively, she wanted to pull her hand back but she fought the urge with all of her strength. The light became too bright to watch and Solana looked away and screamed. It felt as if her entire hand was on fire, yet she didn’t pull her hand out of the transprinter.

At last, the light dimmed and she slowly looked up. Solana expected to see a blackened stump in place of her hand. She was amazed to see her hand and thumb were still intact. Her thumb was red and throbbing with pain, but otherwise looked normal. She took her hand out of the transprinter and held her thumb cupped in her left hand, trying to deal with the pain as Marina walked up behind her.

“What’s wrong, Solana?” Marina asked.

Solana looked up and said, “Nothing, Grandma.”

Marina took Solana's hands in hers to look at her thumb. The redness was already fading and Solana was surprised that there was no sign of any key within. Marina looked at Solana, puzzled, then at the computer screen.

Congratulations Solana, your key has been successfully implanted.

-Click here to receive your personalized book, which includes the meeting location-

Marina read the screen, and her eyes widened as she said, "Oh my, Solana! What have you gotten into?"

Marina didn't wait for an answer. She turned and quickly walked down the hall toward the bedrooms.

"Please, Grandma! I had to, for my baby!" Solana said.

Solana turned and clicked on the final link. Soon a small brown book arrived in the transprinter. Solana picked it up. The book had a hard cover with cushioned leathery feel. She saw an emblem embossed on the front. It was a horse reeling up in the center of a circle. Another circle created a frame around the first circle. Within the frame, Solana saw smaller symbols spaced equally around. She saw a sunflower, apple, grapes, oats, yerba mate leaf, tomato, and more. Solana smiled, knowing those symbols represented the seeds and plants she had to bring. Solana opened the book to somewhere in the middle and noticed the pages were the same light tan

cloth as The Constitution book. Solana had opened the book at the fifth page of the constitution. She saw her green colored signature and another new signature already added below hers. She realized she had something to help convince her family it was real. She turned around to see her mother and father approaching with angry faces. Marina followed close behind.

“Solana, we need to talk. In the kitchen now!” Esperanza said firmly.

Solana got up and walked into the kitchen as her parents followed close behind. Solana felt her abdomen muscles tighten as she walked. Instinctively, she put her hand on the bottom of her belly. Solana sat at the kitchen table as her mother and father sat opposite her. Marina sat down next to Solana.

“What have you done now?” Esperanza asked Solana.

“I won the lottery and they sent me this book.”

“Let me see the book,” Esperanza said.

Solana handed the book to her mother. Solana was feeling so tired she hoped the book would explain everything. Solana could feel another contraction starting. She was sure it was false Braxton Hick’s contractions, but her muscles tightened so much it hurt. Solana held her belly, not saying a word as she watched her mother and father read. Marina got up and went around the table to stand behind Esperanza and Marcos so she could read the book too. As the contraction went away, Solana decided to try to explain herself.

“I got an email that said I won the lottery. I really think this is for real, Mama. I want to go. I want us to have a better place to live,” Solana said.

Esperanza glanced at her daughter and then looked back at the book to continue reading. In ten minutes, Solana could feel another contraction starting and slowly becoming stronger and painful. She began to blow out slowly as if trying to blow out a candle as she held her belly. Solana wondered if she was going into labor. If this was false labor, then she wondered how bad real labor was going to be.

“Solana, are you having labor pains?” Marina asked when she noticed Solana struggling with her discomfort.

“I don’t know,” Solana said, as she performed breathing exercises.

Esperanza and Marcos looked up at Solana. They put the book down and came to her side.

“You need to lie down, Solana,” Esperanza said as she took Solana’s hands in hers.

Esperanza led Solana to the living room couch. Marina’s pillows and blankets were still on the couch.

“Lie down on your left side, dear,” Esperanza told her daughter.

Solana laid herself down. Marina brought Solana a glass of water.

“Drink this, Solana. You might be dehydrated,” Marina told her granddaughter.

Solana took the glass of water and drank.

After a several minutes of resting Solana said, “I think the contractions are going away.”

“Good. But for now, just rest and keep drinking water,” Esperanza said as she covered Solana with Marina’s blanket.

Esperanza and Marina went back to the kitchen. Solana was grateful to rest her head. She was in no mood for a long family debate. Solana thought, it didn’t matter what they decided to do she was going. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

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When Solana woke up, she saw her mother walking down the hallway toward the front door. Solana saw her glance into the living room as she walked by. Esperanza stopped and walked into the living room toward Solana.

Esperanza sat next to Solana. “How are you feeling?”

“OK, I guess. I just woke up,” Solana said.

“I have some bad news. Your cousin David passed away last night,” said Esperanza.

“Oh, no,” Solana said as tears fell down her cheek. “Why? Why does the world have to be such an awful place?”

Esperanza put her arms around her daughter and held her as she sobbed. “We already buried David under the oak tree he liked to climb. I didn’t want to wake you.”

A single tear slid down Esperanza’s cheek as they embraced. After Solana’s sobs began to subside, Esperanza let her go.

“Solana, we have decided to go,” Esperanza said.

“To the new home?” Solana asked as her face brightened a bit and she wiped the tears off her cheeks.

“Yes,” Esperanza said as she examined Solana’s thumbnail. “I don’t see any key. Are you sure they implanted a key?”

“Oh yes! It hurt so much. There has to be something there.”

“We are going to need a lot of faith, but it is our best option. The hydrogen sulfide levels are going up fast. Your dad took a reading this morning and told me they're at four parts per million. It was only zero point five a week ago. We have decided to leave today. Solana, I need you to help pack. But I want you to stay inside,” Esperanza said.

“We are leaving today?” Solana asked.

“Yes, everyone has been working frantically to get ready, even while you were sleeping. The men went back to the valley and found another truck and horse trailer. Now we have three trucks and trailers. Only two of the trailers have living quarters inside, so it will be very cramped.”

“I don’t care. I’m happy we’re going. What animals are we bringing?”

“Don’t worry Solana; you can take your horse. We’re taking eight horses and four llamas. Your book says that we will get rewarded for bringing extra animals from the list,” Esperanza said.

“Really? What kind of reward?” Solana asked.

“We can earn points that will increase our family’s status,” Esperanza told her.

“Oh, good thing we have dogs and llamas to bring. What about all those seeds, how are we going to find them?” Solana asked.

“We’re not sure yet, Solana. We will have to work on it, but for now let’s just worry about getting ready to leave,” Esperanza said.

“Where are we going? I never had a chance to see the location. Was it in the book?” Solana asked.

“Oh yes, it was there all right. It shows the location as coordinates of 40.48 degrees north, 106.71 degrees west.”

“Where is that?” Solana asked.

“It’s in United States, in northern Colorado. The closest town is called Steamboat Springs,” Esperanza said.

“United States! That is so far,” Solana said.

“Yes I know. That is why it is best we leave right away. Even though we have about four weeks to get there, we don’t know what problems we might have along the way. Well, we should get busy packing.”

Esperanza got up and headed for the front door. Before she reached the door, she stopped and turned to say, “There’s some soup in the kitchen.

Your grandmother made it with some of the food the men found," Esperanza walked out the front door.

Solana was hungry, so she went to the kitchen. She saw the pot of vegetable soup on the stove. As Solana ladled some of it into a bowl, she looked out the window. She saw her dad and uncle duct-taping plastic over the windows of the horse trailers. They must be trying to seal the trailers from the sulfide she thought. She watched for a few minutes and then took her soup and sat down at the kitchen table to eat. Solana quickly finished off the soup. Then she got up and headed for her bedroom to pack her clothes. Jose came into the house and followed behind her.

"I'm so happy you won, Solana. Are you going to pack your things?" Jose asked Solana.

"Yes I am. Did you already pack your clothes Jose?" Solana asked.

"Yep! My Mom told me to ask if you need help packing. Do you?" "Your Mom is smart Jose. I do need help. Would you help me?"

Jose nodded and followed Solana.

After hours of her family packing and preparing, Solana was eager to leave. She went into the kitchen where her parents, uncle, aunt, and Lukas gathered around a map discussing the best route.

"When are we going to leave? The sun is setting already," Solana said with Jose standing next to her.

They all looked up from the map. Esperanza said, "She's right. We can work out the details as we go. I think we're ready to start our journey."

Marcos said, “Yes, let’s get the animals loaded and get going.”

Esperanza folded the map as everyone headed out the front door. Solana started to follow them but Esperanza stopped her.

“Solana, wait,” Esperanza said as she grabbed a gas mask off the kitchen counter. “Wear this. It’s better to be safe since you are pregnant.”

“Oh Mama, you are babying me,” Solana said with a smile as she put on the gas mask.

Solana looked out through the mask’s plastic window and thought how ridiculous she must look. Esperanza smiled at her daughter and headed out the front door. Solana followed her mother, turning to look one last time at her uncle’s house before she stepped out onto the front porch.

Solana headed for the barn as she watched Ramiro lead one of his horses to a trailer. Jose followed Solana.

“Are you going to get your horse?” Jose asked Solana as he rubbed his eyes.

“Yes, I am,” Solana said as she watched Jose rub tears away. Solana knew he must be crying about losing his brother, David. They walked past Lukas, who was leading his black Criollo horse from the barn. Lukas claimed his horse was the fastest, so he named him Midnight Racer. Solana was sure Sunflower Magic could beat him in a race, and she would prove it once her baby was born. Lukas smirked at her and shook his head. Jose stuck his tongue out at his older brother. Solana felt foolish being the only one wearing a gas mask. She reached to pull it off but stopped herself. She

didn’t want to do anything that might hurt her baby. She decided to ignore her cousin and continued into the barn. She went to Sunflower Magic’s stall.

“Hello girl,” Solana said with a muffled sounding voice from within the mask.

Solana’s horse raised her head in alarm because she didn’t recognize her voice.

“Easy girl,” Solana said as she went into her horse’s stall and let her sniff her hand.

When her horse relaxed, she grabbed her bridle to lead her out of the barn. Jose was following next to Solana as he rubbed his eyes.

“My eyes hurt!” Jose blurted out and then started coughing.

Solana looked at Jose and wondered what to do. She saw her aunt Irene and waved at her to come over.

“Jose’s eyes are hurting him,” Solana told her aunt.

Irene looked at her son’s eyes. Solana thought Jose’s eyes looked as red as his mother’s eyes, only he didn’t have the dark circles under them.

“I think it might be the sulfide. Come on Jose, I need to get you a mask,” Irene said as she led Jose into the gooseneck trailer connected to the red truck.

Solana led her horse toward the trailers. She saw her father loading his horse into a gooseneck trailer connected to a black pickup truck. Solana

followed her father and put her horse into the last stall available in the trailer.

Marcos said, “Solana, this will be our home for a while. Your mother put your things in this trailer.”

“OK Papa,” Solana said.

“Your mother will drive this truck and trailer. I will be driving that truck,” Marcos said as he looked out the window of the trailer and pointed toward a rusty white pickup truck hitched to a dented old trailer full of llamas.

Solana and Marcos left the trailer. Marcos whistled for the three dogs and motioned for them to get into the trailer. The dogs ran up the ramp and into the trailer. Marcos closed the ramp and latched it. Esperanza walked up and gave her husband a long kiss and hug. Then she looked at her daughter.

“You are welcome to ride with me, Solana,” Esperanza said.

Solana said, “That sounds good, Mama.”

Marcos helped Solana climb up into the black truck as Esperanza climbed into the driver’s side. Then he turned to help Marina climb in.

Marcos told Esperanza, “We all have full tanks of sodium borohydride solution and about 20 pounds of dry sodium borohydride stored in each of the trailers, thanks to Ramiro’s good luck in finding a hidden stash this morning. That should be enough fuel for several days of driving.”

Solana remembered when she was about ten years old her father tried to explain how cars worked: “Solana, see this white powder? It’s called sodium borohydride. We mix it with water, one part borohydride with two parts water. That means for every liter of borohydride I need to add two liters of water. Then the borohydride solution is split up into two new chemicals, hydrogen and borax.”

“What is borax?” Solana asked.

“Borax is kind of like soap. We can use it to clean things. Next, the truck’s fuel cells use the hydrogen to create electricity. The electricity powers the motor for the truck to run. Oh, and as the fuel cells use up the hydrogen it creates water. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa. So, if the truck makes soap and water, why don’t bubbles come out of the tail pipe?”

Marcos laughed at the idea of his truck being a bubble machine and tried to explain. “No, I'm sorry, Solana. There will be no bubbles. Only water comes out of the exhaust. The borax is in a separate holding tank so I can take it to a recycling center. The borax is recycled back into sodium borohydride and it all starts over.”

Even as an adult, Solana still thought it would be neat if vehicles would create a trail of bubbles everywhere they went. “What if we run out of borohydride on the way to the United States?” she asked her father.

“We are hoping to find some along the way. We should be able to find plenty in Cusco, Peru since there is a large recycling center in that city.”

Marcos asks Esperanza, “All set?”

Esperanza nodded and Marcos shut the door. Solana watched her father climb into the white truck. Lukas was sitting in the passenger side. Ramiro climbed into the red pickup truck. Irene and Jose were already sitting there. Esperanza started the engine. Solana pulled off the gas mask relieved to take it off. Then she noticed tubing going from the back of the truck and leading into the front of the trailer’s gooseneck. “What is the tubing for?” she asked her mother.

“That is to pump fresh air into the trailer. All the trucks have filters installed similar to the filters in your gas mask. If we keep the air pressure in the trailer more than the outside pressure, it will keep the sulfide out. That way we don’t have to keep a perfect airtight seal.”

“Does that mean the truck engine will have to keep running to keep the poison out?” Solana asked.

“Well, yes it would. Except, we also have electric pumps and filters in the trailers so we don’t have to waste fuel while we sleep. We moved most of the solar panels from Ramiro’s house to the top of the trailers. We installed extra batteries in the trailers too so we should have plenty of electricity. But it’s best not to waste our stored electricity if we don’t have to.” Esperanza put the truck into drive and led the way down the driveway.

Solana was so excited to be leaving her Uncle Ramiro’s home. Her mother kept her in the house for so long that she felt like a caged hamster.

Finally, she was going on an adventure. Solana smiled as they turned north and headed for The United States of America.

Chapter 4

Skylar ran across the field, heading straight for a steep drop off. He felt the lines tighten behind him as the paraglider caught in the wind. Suddenly, his feet lifted off the ground. He soared over the treetops, as he glided away from his hometown, Wengen. Paragliding was one of his favorite sports, but he didn’t enjoy it as much because he had to wear a gas mask in the valley. Before the world became so toxic, he'd liked to take tourists for a tandem ride. He remembered how fun it was to impress the girls with aero-acrobatic maneuvers like wingovers and controlled spins called helicopters. Most of the girls practically begged him for a date before they landed in Interlaken. He missed guiding the tourists, especially when they were cute girls. All of the tourists had disappeared several years earlier.

As he glided through the air, he looked down to his left at the Lauterbrunnen valley. The valley’s green grass had died and only large patches of brown dirt remained. Skylar hated that the Staubbach Falls was still not flowing. He used to love flying by the roaring narrow waterfalls. He would quickly get the girls attention by spraying them with a light mist of water from the falls. Then he would tell them a few lines from a poem about the falls: “Down from the lofty rocky wall, streams the bright flood, then spreadth gently in cloudy billows, o’er the smooth rock,” Skylar would say.

If the girls asked, he would let them know it was a line from the poem, “Spirit Song Over the Waters.” He would tell them how Johann Wolfgang wrote the poem hundreds of years ago as he sat by the falls listening to the loud rush of the water. Skylar loved the look on the girl’s faces when they thought he studied poetry. His friend Porter had told him that girls loved poetry. It seemed his friend was right about girls. Porter had been his best friend since they were seven years old. Then Porter’s grandmother, who lived in France, developed health problems. Porter and his family moved back to France to care for her. He hadn’t heard from Porter since, five years later. Skylar wondered if he was still alive.

He pulled on the right riser to follow the U-shaped canyon below. The Swiss Alps rose steeply on both sides of the canyon. Skylar squinted as the sun suddenly rose above the peaks to his right. He looked at the small stream of water running down the middle of the canyon. Amazing, he thought, that this little stream used to be the powerful Lutschine River. The Eiger glacier used to feed the falls and river with a large volume of water during the summer, but only a small fragment of the glacier remained. It was July and there was only a trickle of water coming from the mountains. He really missed white water rafting down the Lutschine. It was an exciting ride, but he was more worried about the river running dry. When that happened, he and his father would have no water to drink.

Skylar maneuvered closer to a rock face to find a warm column of air. As he entered the thermal, his paraglider wing rippled in the turbulent wind

and then caught in the rising air. He turned the paraglider, circling to stay in the thermal letting it carry him higher. He needed to keep his altitude up if he was going to glide all the way to Interlaken Airport. After several turns, Skylar left the thermal and followed the canyon towards Interlaken.

A mountain loomed directly in front of him. He saw the Schynige Platte, a finger-shaped rocky outcrop, on top of the mountain. He remembered a group of tourists he'd led on a hike to the Schynige Platte. He would never forget the cute redheaded girl from Ireland. When they reached the peak, she pulled him aside and behind some pine trees. The rest of the group was so captivated by the view that no one noticed they were missing.

He pulled on the left riser to turn following the canyon to the left. The city of Interlaken came into view with Lake Thun behind it. Skylar thought the jagged mountain peaks surrounding the city looked like an impenetrable fence. Yet, it offered no protection from the world’s poisons. Skylar saw smoke coming from several different areas of the city. As he glided closer, it looked as if one of the smoke plumes was coming from the Metropole Swiss Hotel in the center of the city. What a shame, it was once a beautiful hotel, he thought. The whole city had a depressing hazy gray color. He pulled on the right riser and got a good view of the airport with Lake Brienzer behind it. He was happy to see that no smoke was rising from the airport. Skylar looked down at the forest of pine tree skeletons far below his dangling feet.

During dinner at his father's hotel, his father Lorenz had told him that he had won a lottery on the internet.

"Skylar, a group of people have found a way to create a safe place to live. Apparently, it's not very big so they are only inviting thirty families of seven. I think they call the place Teal Haven."

Skylar asked his dad, "What place on Earth could be better than living in the Swiss Alps?"

"Good question, Skylar. Yet, the sulfide is climbing up the mountains and will eventually reach Wengen. I'm thinking they built a giant dome. The location they gave me is in Colorado."

"Great. I have to live in a bubble for the rest of my life. That sucks! Well, at least they have mountains in Colorado."

"Technically, I didn't win the lottery," Lorenz said. "I won but, only as a secondary winner. That means we have to travel all the way to the United States only to wait to see if one of the winners doesn't show. If we are first in line and a spot opens up they will let us in. Plus, they expect us to bring seeds and animals even if we didn't win."

"We have to bring seeds and animals? Why?" Skylar asked, puzzled.

"I believe they need seeds and animals to complete the biosphere. They want us to bring falconry birds of prey and a long list of seeds. However, I do not intend to follow their rules. When we get there, I'm going to take charge. I know some people, still living in the mountains, who will be very interested in joining our endeavor."

“Who? So many people have either died or left.”

“Erik Bauer, Roth Herman and Walter Faust to name a few," his dad said. "Oh, and of course Carl Luft, since he is an excellent pilot. Did you know he won the Red Bull flying race in Interlaken when he was your age? This reminds me, we will need a jet. One that is capable of flying long range and carrying at least eight people. Skylar, I need you to go to Interlaken and find a jet that appears to be functional and meets our needs. In addition, while you are there look for guns or weapons of any kind. I want you to hide the weapons in the jet and secure them with a lock. I want the jet and weapons ready when I get my team together. If you cannot find a jet in Interlaken, we will have to check the airport at Bern. However, I’m hoping we won’t have to go that far. Can I count on you Skylar?”

“Of course Dad! When do you want me to leave? Tonight?”

“No, first thing in the morning will be fine,” Lorenz said as he ruffled his son’s blonde hair. “And get a haircut, it should be above your ears.”

Now the airport was directly below Skylar. He spiraled down toward the ground. After several quick turns, he landed with a few running steps across the dirt field. Skylar remembered how the fields used to be a beautiful green grass, but now all that was left was grayish brown dirt. He took off his harness and packed the lines and the glider wing into his backpack. Skylar felt the sweat dripping off his forehead and into his eyes. He shook his head to get the sweat to fly off and wished he had worn a

sweatband. There was no way to wipe the sweat off his forehead while he was wearing a gas mask. He tried to ignore the heat and the sweat and continued packing his paraglider. He noticed several hangars were completely smashed. There was debris spread out towards the control tower. He saw what remained of a large jet that had crashed into the tower. The top half of the tower had toppled over and smashed the jet. He doubted anyone could have survived that crash.

Skylar put his backpack on and headed for the hangar that was not destroyed. As he walked past the debris of the destroyed hangars, he heard a noise.

“Moaaawwwwww!”

He stopped walking to look for the source. It seemed to be coming from behind the hangar. He thought that maybe someone was still alive from the crash. He ran towards the hangar until he reached the front.

“Moooaaaaarrg!”

Skylar stopped. The strange gurgling noise didn’t sound human to him. He slowly walked along the side of the hangar.

“Aaaaaawwgggge.”

Skylar stopped again, wondering if he should even investigate. He was supposed to be finding a jet, not chasing noises. However, he was curious about what could be making such a strange sound. He looked around the back corner of the hangar and saw a brown and white cow and her nursing calf standing several feet away. Skylar stepped out from behind

the hangar and stared in disbelief. He wondered how they could be surviving in this poisonous air. Then he saw blood dripping from the mouth of the cow.

“Uggh,” Skylar said, a little too loudly.

The calf stopped nursing and looked up. Skylar jumped back at the sight of the calf. The calf had no fur. Its skin was a sickly light yellow color with red all over its face and nose. He looked at the cow and realized the cow’s udders were also red. They were bloody and some of them were shredded.

“Mooaaaawwk,” the calf shrieked at Skylar.

“Sick!” Skylar said.

He turned and walked away. The scene of the cow and calf disgusted him. He wanted to get his job done and get out of the valley. He felt like he was suffocating in the gas mask.

There was a padlock on the door of the hangar. Skylar took off his backpack and pulled out a small black leather case that held many slender metal tools. His friend Porter had given him his lock pick tools as a going away present when he left for France. Skylar chose a small thin angled tool and closed the case. He inserted it between the hasp and the body of the lock and twisted. The lock popped opened. Skylar put the lock pick set away and removed the padlock. He opened the door and walked into the hangar. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw a shadowy image of a jet.

“Jackpot!” Skylar said as he walked closer.

Falcon 3010LX was written on the vertical tail wing of the jet. That is perfect, he thought. Skylar found some metal stairs and pushed them up to the jet's door. He climbed up and opened the jet door. The jet looked new, except it was a little dusty. He glanced into the cockpit and thought it looked undamaged. He looked for the fuel gage.

"Amazing, it even has a full tank of fuel," Skylar said to himself, smiling about his good fortune.

He checked out the passenger area. In the front of the passenger compartment stood two large leather reclining chairs on each side of the walkway. The chairs faced each other, with small wooden tables between them. He walked past those chairs and saw four more large leather chairs, this time all on the same side of the walkway. There was a large wooden table between them. Across from the table and four chairs was a long wooden filing cabinet. He stopped and opened one of the drawers. It was empty. He opened another drawer and found an operating manual for the jet. He put the manual in his backpack. The third drawer was empty. He continued to the back of the jet. He opened a door leading into a small bathroom. There was another door in the bathroom so he opened that door. It leads into a small cargo area that was empty. Skylar thought he would store any weapons he found in there. He closed the door and left the jet.

Suddenly, music started playing from his pocket. Skylar pulled out his thin U-Manifest. He glanced at the screen that read "Dad Calling."

"Open," Skylar said.

The U-Manifest projected a holographic image of his father into the air. The image of Lorenz said, “Everything is going according to plan. Both Carl and Erik have already agreed to join us. Did you find a jet?”

“Yes, Dad. See for yourself,” Skylar said as he pointed the U-Manifest at the jet. “It’s a Falcon 3010LX with a full tank of fuel!”

“Excellent work, son. How about the weapons?” Lorenz asked.

“I was just about to look for them,” Skylar replied.

“Good. I have another call, Skylar. I need to go,” Lorenz's image disappeared.

Skylar put the U-Manifest back in his pocket. He left the hangar and didn’t bother to lock it, hoping he would be back soon. He walked towards the city, heading for a group of houses that was closest to the airport.

“Mooooaaaaaww,” the cow cried out in pain.

Skylar cringed at the sound of the cow. He saw a twisted metal rod in the wreckage of the other hangars. He stopped and picked it up. He looked back towards the hangar and decided that he should kill the calf and put the cow out of its misery. Skylar thought it wouldn’t take long. He still had plenty of time to find guns. He started walking back towards the hangar. Skylar stopped walking when he heard the faint sound of rain. He looked around and didn’t see any clouds in the sky. He shrugged and continued toward the back of the hangar.

Skylar held the metal rod like a bat as he approached the cow and calf. The calf was standing next to his mother, watching Skylar. They stared

at each other as Skylar slowly walked towards the calf. He imagined he would quickly bash the calf in the head and then finish off the cow. Suddenly, the calf charged at Skylar. Skylar held his ground as the calf ran toward him. His resolve was shaken when the calf opened its mouth freakishly wide to reveal sharp carnivore teeth. At that moment, he wished he had brought his rifle with him. Skylar heard the sound of rain growing louder in the background. He thought it sounded like hail.

However, he focused on the head of the calf, which was at about the height of Skylar’s stomach. As soon as it was close, he swung the metal rod and connected with the calf's head, knocking it off its feet and sending it skiding on the dirt, sliding right next to Skylar. He turned to face the calf and raised the metal rod above his head to strike it again. He brought the rod down, but the calf jumped up too fast and the metal rod hit the dirt. The calf lowered its head and hit Skylar in the stomach, throwing him backwards onto the ground.

Skylar lay on the ground coughing and catching his breath. The calf ran toward Skylar and was on top of him in an instant. It opened its mouth, aiming for Skylar’s throat. Skylar put the metal rod in front of him and the calf clamped down on the rod instead of his neck. It pushed down, trying to force its teeth into Skylar’s neck. He resisted with all his strength but the calf’s mouth was slowly getting closer. Suddenly, the sunlight dimmed as if blocked by a large cloud. The sound of rain was loud, even though it wasn't actually raining. A large yellow insect flew by and distracted the calf. It let

go of the rod, lifted its head, and snapped at the insect. Another insect flew by and the calf chased after it. The calf caught the insect and began to chew it calmly.

Skylar backed up, still lying on the ground. He looked over at the cow and saw thousands of the yellow insects swarming the animal. The cow was running and bucking as the insects landed upon it. The cow stopped running and fell over as the insects completely covered her body. Skylar looked up to see a wide river of insects flowing over his head, coming from the east. The calf was busy chasing and eating the insects. The insects didn't seem to be interested in eating the calf. One of the insects landed next to Skylar, waking him up from the shock of the scene. He turned to look at the insect. It looked like a large black grasshopper with small yellow spots. It was as big as his hand. Its tail curled up under its wings. Skylar thought the tail looked like a scorpion's tail with a stinger that might be venomous.

"Scorpion locusts?" Skylar asked himself.

He quickly smashed it with the metal rod. Skylar thought all locusts had gone extinct decades ago. He remembered learning about them in natural history class. Although, the locusts he read about didn't have scorpion stingers. He looked at the cow that was being eaten alive. He read they ate plants, not meat. He slowly crept back towards the hangar away from the calf and the frenzied insects. Once he reached the side of the hangar, he got up and started running towards the city.

Skylar didn’t quit running until he reached a community north-west of the airport. He stopped and bent over, trying to catch his breath. He wanted to rip the gas mask off his head. He looked back towards the airport. He saw a river of insects flying overhead. He was relieved that none of the insects followed him.

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Skylar walked down the street. His head pounded and he needed to cool off. The white Coolsense short-sleeved shirt was probably the only reason he didn’t have a heat stroke. He refused to wear the tight Coolsense shorts, instead choosing his favorite blue jean shorts. Skylar thought he looked terrible wearing tight shorts.

Skylar walked up to a house and tried to open the door. It was locked, so he stepped back and kicked in the door. The door swung open easily. He was glad the owner didn’t have security bolts, which was not uncommon, since crime was so low in Switzerland. No one was crazy enough to break into someone’s house because the Swiss militia issues military grade automatic rifles to every citizen 20 years and older to help defend the country’s neutrality.

Skylar walked into the house and looked around for a basement door. Shooting was such a popular sport in Switzerland that many people made a shooting range in their basement. He found the stairs leading to the

basement and went down. He was relieved that it felt much cooler in the basement. Sunlight streamed in through the small basement window, providing just enough light to see a gun cabinet against a wall. A small target hung from the ceiling at the far end of the basement, with holes shot through the paper. He walked over to the cabinet even though he saw that it was open and empty. He figured the people who had lived here most likely had taken their guns with them.

“Just in case,” he said as he felt the bottom of the cabinet and found a thin crack. He followed the crack and found a latch hidden behind the frame of the cabinet. He pulled the latch and the bottom of the cabinet lifted up to reveal a hidden compartment. Skylar reached in and pulled out a large knife in a leather sheath. The handle was made of antler, with a hawk head carved into the end. Skylar pulled the knife out of the sheath.

“Nice!” Skylar said.

The knife had a Bowie style blade made of black ceramic. On the spine of the blade was inscribed, “Hawk Spirit Guide You.”

“This one is mine,” Skylar said to himself as he put the knife back into the sheath. He unbuckled his belt and slid the sheath and knife onto his belt. Then he looked back into the compartment and noticed a black velvet jewel case. He thought jewelry was useless, but he was curious what the owners kept hidden. He opened the case and saw a golden necklace with a sun shaped pendant hanging from it. The center of the sun was a large yellow fire gemstone. The sun had seven rays made of diamonds in groups

of three that became smaller the further they were from the center stone. All the stones were inlaid in gold. Skylar watched the fire dancing in the center of the sun. He had never held a fire gemstone before. He was told they were very expensive and hard to manufacture. Skylar kept the necklace and put the jewel case in a small side pocket of his backpack. He thought the people who lived here must have left in a hurry to leave behind such treasures.

Skylar checked the rest of the house. After finding nothing else worth keeping, he walked out and continued down the street. It was so hot outside and he was getting very thirsty. He didn't look for anything to drink since he couldn't drink while he was wearing the gas mask. Skylar passed up some houses with broken windows and doors wide open. He thought someone probably already stole everything. He realized he could hear the scorpion locusts again. He looked up but didn't see any. He started to jog, wondering where he could hide. It sounded like the noise was all around him and it was getting louder. Skylar spun around but still didn't see the scorpion locusts.

"Where are they?" Skylar said as he ran faster, searching for a secure house.

Skylar jumped as a scorpion locust flew right by him. He turned around and saw the rest of the swarm. The scorpion locusts poured into the street from between the houses on both sides of the road and headed straight for him. Skylar sprinted down the road. They were going to eat him

just like the cow, he feared, as he caught up to the scorpion locust that had just passed him. It flew toward him as Skylar veered his path away from it. Skylar reached for his belt and pulled out his new knife. The scorpion locust was right next to him. It's horse-shaped head and black eyes were looking right at him. Its scorpion tail was stretched back and up, poised to strike. Skylar swung the blade and sliced the locust in half. He turned around and saw the swarm was very close behind him. He dashed for the closest house.

As he approached the front door, he looked back and saw the swarm closing in on him. He backed up and kicked the door. It flew open and he jumped inside, slamming the door shut. He heard the sound of hundreds of scorpion locusts flying into the door. He hoped they killed themselves on impact.

Skylar also heard the scorpion locusts hitting a window in the living room next to the entry. He realized the windows might be broken, so he dashed into the living room to check. A large bay window had so many scorpion locusts covering the window that he couldn't see out. Skylar relaxed a little when he saw that none of the windows were broken. He ran to the back of the house and into the kitchen to check the rest of the windows. The kitchen windows faced the back of the house. The kitchen window wasn't broken. Scorpion locusts covered the outside of the window. Skylar felt trapped.

He tapped on the window. "Go away," he shouted at the scorpion locusts. A few of the locusts jumped off the window, but they quickly filled

the empty space again. Skylar walked through the dinette and family room. He saw crawling scorpion locusts covering all the windows. He walked faster as he realized he was surrounded. Skylar went back to the foyer and ran up the stairs, then from one bedroom to the next checking the windows.

He sat down on the bed in the master bedroom, trying to calm down. Skylar pulled out his U-Manifest.

“Call Dad,” Skylar said, but nothing happened.

“Status check.” Still no response. Skylar opened the back of the U-Manifest only to find a dark row of light-emitting diodes.

“Great! What perfect timing for my 'manifest to die,” Skylar said, and sat wondering what to do. Maybe if he waited, they would go away. He looked around the bedroom. The oak dresser had several empty drawers hanging open. It looked like the people had packed all of their belongings in a hurry. Skylar didn’t think he would find anything he could use to fight millions of stinging insects. He needed a powerful insecticide, but he doubted he would find any. Insecticides had been outlawed when he was a little boy, but he thought he might still find some in the garage.

“Of course!” Skylar said as he jumped up from the bed. He didn’t care about finding insecticide if there was a car in the garage.

Skylar ran down the stairs and headed for the back of the house. He saw a scorpion locust flying straight for his face. Skylar batted it away. It bounced off the wall and landed unharmed on the floor. Quickly stomping his shoe down onto it, he smashed the scorpion locust. He looked around,

but didn’t see any more. As he walked through the dinette and into the family room, he saw another scorpion locust flying straight at him. He grabbed a lamp from an end table, and threw it at the locust. It avoided the lamp, but Skylar dove into a forward roll and it flew over him.

Skylar got up and ran for the laundry room. Just before he slammed the laundry room door, he caught a quick glimpse of the scorpion locusts crawling on the outside of the fireplace glass doors. He realized they were getting in through the chimney. Skylar looked down and saw a big opening at the bottom of the laundry room door. They would soon be crawling in there. A pile of crumpled towels lay on the floor in front of the washing machine. He stuffed some into the opening. Satisfied that the scorpion locusts couldn’t get in, he walked to the other door in the laundry room, hoping it led into the garage. He began to turn the doorknob, but hesitated. What if this door leads outside? he wondered. He imagined the room being flooded with ravenous scorpion locusts. He put his head against the door, but he couldn’t hear anything. Skylar smacked the gas mask in frustration. He doubted he could hear with a gas mask in the way. After a few moments, he realized there was nothing else he could do. Skylar turned the knob and cracked the door open a tiny bit. He couldn’t see any scorpion locusts, as it was dark on the other side of the door.

“The garage!” Skylar said to himself as he swung the door wide open.

The garage looked empty. “No, it can’t be,” Skylar said as he shook his head in disappointment.

He walked into the garage and flipped the light switch on. The lights didn’t work. He thought something must have damaged their solar panels. With no power, it was hard to see in the dim light. However, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw what looked like a dust cover draped over a motorcycle. Skylar smiled as he pulled the cover off, revealing a green dirt bike, a 450RX.

“This will do just fine,” Skylar said.

He grabbed the handlebars of the dirt bike to push it off the stand, but stopped when he saw a large duffel bag on the floore. He grabbed the bag, unzipped it, and saw apparel and gear for racing. He pulled out a green leather jacket and matching leather pants. Skylar took off his backpack and put on the jacket. He was amazed it fit perfectly. He took off his jean shorts, slipped on the leather pants, and smiled at how good they felt. He also found a helmet, riding boots, gloves, and a chest protector. He put on all the gear except the helmet. He wished he could wear the helmet, too but there was no way it would fit over the gas mask.

“Now that I’m ready to ride, I bet it won’t start,” Skylar said as he stood looking at the dirt bike. “Only one way to find out.” He rocked the dirt bike off its stand and wheeled it to the center of the garage. He straddled the bike and pulled out the kick-start peg. Skylar stood up and forcefully kicked down on the kick-starter. The engine started up but quickly died. Skylar bent down and turned the choke valve to the on position. He kicked again and the engine started and immediately sputtered. Skylar gently

revved up the engine just in time to keep it running. After a few gentle revs, the engine idled on its own.

While the engine idled and warmed, Skylar began to wonder how he was going to get out of the house. There was no power in the house so he would have to open the garage door by hand. Would he have time to open the garage door, jump on the dirt bike and escape? He feared more likely he would open the garage door and be swarmed by scorpion locusts.

Skylar got off the dirt bike and leaned it up against the wall. He slowly opened the laundry room door just enough to see into the family room. A few scorpion locusts flew by, but they didn't seem to see him. The fireplace doors were still covered, as was the family room windows leading outside. Skylar grabbed some more dirty towels and started ripping them in strips. After he had a pile of torn strips, he tied them together to make a long rope. Skylar tied one end of the towel rope to the doorknob of the door leading into the family room. He left the other end of the rope on the floor. Skylar went back to the dirt bike and pushed it towards the laundry room.

He reached down, scooped up his backpack, and put it on. He pushed the dirt bike to the laundry room door, turned the handlebars, and leaned the dirt bike to get it through the doorway. When the dirt bike was halfway through, he leaned it against the doorway. Skylar picked up the other end of the towel rope and got on the dirt bike.

"Ayeee Yaw!" Skylar shouted as he pulled on the rope.

The laundry room door flew wide open. Skylar opened the throttle to drive the dirt bike toward the doorway. Skylar hit the brakes before the handle bars hit the side of the doorway and quickly maneuvered the dirt bike through the doorway and into the family room. Immediately, the scorpion locusts flew at Skylar. He opened the throttle to drive out of the doorway and leaned the dirt bike for a sharp turn to the left heading for the kitchen. He ducked as a scorpion locust flew directly at him. Skylar felt a pinch on his right thigh. He looked down and saw a scorpion locust stinging him. He flicked it off his leg before it could sting him again.

Skylar lowered his head, leaned forward, and sped out of the family room, through the dinette, and into the kitchen. He slammed on the brakes and skidded across the linoleum floor of the kitchen then turned the corner to the left. He glanced back and saw several voracious scorpion locusts gaining on him. Skylar felt a tingling sensation starting on his right thigh and spreading down into his calf. He'd been so sure the leather pants and jacket would be thick enough to stop the stingers from reaching his skin. He was wrong. He suddenly felt naked against the swarming scorpion locusts. He had to be fast if he was going to keep them from stinging him again.

As he pulled out of the turn, he opened the throttle wide open and raced for the bay window. Just before he struck it, Skylar ducked his head behind the handlebars. With a loud crash, Skylar blasted through the glass, smashing and scattering scorpion locusts in every direction. He landed in

the middle of the front yard. Without hesitation, he drove out into the street and rapidly left the swarming scorpion locusts behind.

Driving up into the mountains at full speed, Skylar reached the rail tracks leading to Wengen in record time. He followed the tracks and soon was back in Wengen driving down the narrow streets. It felt weird to him to be driving in Wengen. He had never driven a motorized vehicle in town before. There were no cars allowed in Wengen as everyone had to leave their vehicles in a parking lot in Lauterbrunnen and take the train the rest of the way. He and his father were the only two left in the entire town, so no one was there to stop him. He pulled up in front of a four-star hotel with 120 rooms. His father and mother had bought the hotel before he was born, so it had been his home all his life. He didn't mind because he was given a large hotel room of his own when he turned 16 years old. Sadly, it was soon after his sixteenth birthday that his mother became ill and passed away.

Skylar drove up to the side of the building so he could lean the dirt bike against it. He pulled off the gas mask and took a deep breath of air. His medium-length blonde hair was soaked with sweat and his face was red. He pushed his hair back and got off the dirt bike. Skylar fell to the ground as soon as he tried to step down on his right leg. It was almost completely numb. Skylar slowly pushed himself back up and balanced on his left leg. He hopped toward the lobby door, dragging his right leg as he went.

"There you are! What took you so long? I tried to call," Lorenz said as he burst through the lobby doors. "What's wrong with your leg?"

“I got stung by some kind of insect!” Skylar said.

Lorenz put his arm around Skylar to help him walk. He glanced at the dirt bike. “Are you sure you didn’t hurt yourself on that? And why didn’t you answer my calls?”

“My ‘manifest stopped working. I think the attack from the mutated calf might have broken it.” They struggled to walk through the lobby toward the elevator.

Lorenz looked at his son for a minute and asked, “Have you been taking drugs, son?”

“No, Dad! I know it sounds crazy but there are … things living in the valley. It’s not safe.”

“I think you have heat exhaustion. Nothing can live in the hydrogen sulfide. Not even the grass survived. How could any animal be alive?” Lorenz pressed the button to call the elevator. “You need to get back to your room and get some rest.”

Lorenz hit the button for the fourth floor, the hotel’s highest level. Skylar leaned against the side of the elevator, feeling sick. He wondered if maybe the heat did get to him. Could he have hallucinated all of that? It seemed so real yet so completely insane.

“Did you get the weapons secured?” Lorenz asked Skylar.

“No, the scorpion locusts … there were so many of them and they were all after me. I think they wanted to eat me like they did that cow.”

Skylar rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes. His head was pounding so hard he didn’t care if his father thought he was crazy.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Skylar opened his eyes and hopped toward the door as his father reached out to help him return to his room.

Chapter 5

The droning of the RV rolling down the highway made Peggy feel sleepy. Her eyes drooped but she didn't want to sleep. She looked at her younger brother Phil, who was sleeping next to her on the sofa bed. A small brown rabbit slept cuddled up against Phil's belly. Her brother's black hair was cut military short, which she still couldn't get used to. She liked his hair long like their Cherokee ancestors but their foster parents wouldn't allow it.

Peggy turned around on the sofa bed and looked outside to see where they were. She didn't want to wake her brother after such a long day of traveling. He needs his sleep since he is only eight years old, she thought. Peggy got up on her knees and pushed open the brown curtains to peer out the window. A forest of dead pines trees stretched for miles over rolling hills. Large patches of dirt were scattered throughout the forest. The dead forest looked eerie with long shadows cast by the dim light of the setting sun. In the distance, tall grey mountains slowly drifted by. Peggy thought it had looked the same all day. Only now, it was darker and large fluffy clouds began to fill the sky. Peggy thought one of them looked like a turtle. She watched the turtle cloud as it slowly broke up and lost its shape. Peggy wondered if they were still in Alaska. They had left their home in Denali just after sunrise.

“I was lucky to have found such a nice RV in one of the Denali campgrounds,” her foster father, Peter had told her.

Peggy knew the RV must have come from one of the dead campgrounds. It was dead because they weren’t high enough in the mountains to have fresh air. She wondered if the people were still in the RV when Peter found it. She didn’t want to think about that so she got off the sofa to ask her foster parents where they were. Peggy stopped to cover her brother with a blanket, being careful not to cover the rabbit. Peggy stepped around the rabbit cage on the floor and walked up to the front of the RV. She looked out the windshield at the empty road that seemed to go on forever. Her foster father, who was driving the RV, had a rounded face that looked scruffy with a shadow of a beard. His dark brown hair was lightened by strands of grey.

Her foster mother Vicki told Peggy, “You should be sleeping. Little girls should be in bed by eight o’clock."

“I’m not a little girl! I’m 12 years old,” Peggy said. Then she turned to ask Peter, “Where are we?”

“She’s right, you know. It’s ten o’clock. You should try to get some sleep,” said Peter.

“I want to stay awake until we get to the next stop. I need some fresh air.”

“All right, since we should be to our next stop soon. I’m hoping we will find a place to stop in Whitehorse.”

“What is Whitehorse?”

“It’s the capital city in the Yukon Territory.”

“Is that in Alaska?”

Vicki laughed, but quickly stifled herself and said, “No, honey, that is Canada.”

Peggy looked down at the map book in the center console. Underneath it, she saw a corner of Peter’s new book. She reached down and shifted the map book to the side so she could see it better. Peter glanced down to see what she was doing. Peggy asked, “Can I look at your book?”

“OK, but only for a minute and then I want it back. It’s very important we don’t lose it.”

Peggy picked up the soft leathery book. The front cover of the book had two circles forming a frame. Inside the circles was an embossed image of a rabbit. There were symbols inside the circular frame going around the rabbit. She recognized the shape of carrots, a lemon, a tree, and a clover. Peggy ran her fingers across the embossed images, then opened the book and quickly flipped through it pages. She didn’t see any pictures so she stopped turning pages and began to read.

Chapter 3 - Family Responsibilities

Each family will be responsible for the care and breeding of their designated animals. Bonuses will be given to families who bring extra seeds and animals in the form of hierarchy points. Hierarchy points are explained in chapter 5.

Each family must keep their quarters and animal cages clean or penalties will include losing family hierarchy points.

All shared facilities will be maintained by crew and/or families who lost their animals or all hierarchy points.

If all your animals die, your family will be assigned a new responsibility, which will be chosen based on your skills, knowledge, and available tasks in order to help the current crew.

Peggy stopped reading, wondering what all that meant. It was hard to understand, she thought, and flipped through the pages some more.

Peter said, “OK Peggy, that’s enough looking. Put the book back down, you’re making me nervous.”

Peggy put the book back on the center console.

Vicki looked at Peter and asked, “How much longer? The air is so stale. I wish I could open a window.”

“Not much longer. Besides, the air is not stale. It’s all in your head. I told you this is a large RV with enough air for us to survive for days.”

“It is not in my head! I have been feeling sleepy and I have a bad headache. They are both symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning. And those kids were acting like maniacs all day, screaming and climbing all over the RV. I bet they used up all the oxygen.”

“They’re just kids, Vicki! It has been a long day for them too. You’re probably just tired.”

“Just kids! They have been driving me crazy all day! I told you I didn’t want kids. You said we would foster kids for only six months. That is the only reason I agreed in the first place.”

“Well, I’m sorry!" Peter said. "I thought you might want kids of your own if you knew what it was like to be a mom.”

“It has been four years! Not six months! Four years! Another one of your broken promises.”

“It’s not my fault the whole damn foster organization is gone.”

Peggy glared at Vicki, who didn’t seem to notice. She hated her. She hated all the makeup she wore trying to look pretty. What good is looking pretty when you are so mean, she thought?

Vicki snapped, “We could have left them with that nice couple back in the town of Tok, but no!”

“No way!," Peter said. "There is no way I would leave them with a couple of strangers, Vicki! Don’t you have a heart?”

“They seemed perfectly fine to me,” Vicki said.

“You could actually do that? Leave them with strangers to die while you go on to a safe place to live?” Peter asked.

Vicki didn’t answer. She stared out the passenger window with her arms crossed. Peter turned to look at Peggy. She had tears welling up in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Peggy. You know I love you,” Peter said.

Peggy turned and ran to the back of the RV. She threw herself face first onto the queen-sized bed and began to cry.

After a while, she sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes. She wished her Grandmother Rainwater were still alive. She loved her and Phil very much and used to spend time telling them traditional Cherokee stories. Her favorite was about the Little People or Yunwi as her Grandmother called them. The Yunwi were invisible but sometimes they let people see them. She said they had hair so long it almost touched the ground. Peggy wanted to grow her hair that long but Vicki wouldn't let her grow it any longer than her waistline. The Yunwi liked to punish people who were mean towards them. She wished they would punish Vicki.

Peggy got up to check on Phil. He was still sleeping. The rabbit had moved to sleep on the floor near the sofa bed. Peggy bent down to open a side zipper of her blue jean backpack sitting on the floor. She pulled out a small white book with a pattern of light blue flowers decorating the outside. She also pulled out a pen from the backpack pocket and zipped it closed again. Peggy sat down on the bench seat at the dinette table, which was right next to the sofa bed. She opened the book to reveal blank pages.

"You should write down the story of our journey. I bet your children will love to hear how you survived," Peter had told Peggy when he gave her the journal the night before they left the Eielson Visitor Center in Denali.

She had lived with Peter and Vicki Ross at the visitor center's only apartment since she and Phil were assigned to them. Peter was the

manager at the visitor center. Peter explained to Peggy that meant he took care of the building and made sure everyone did their job. The visitor center was built high in the Denali Mountains and was probably the only reason she was still alive, Peggy thought.

Now she began to write.

Wednesday July 27

Dear Diary,

I hate my foster mother! I'm going to run away as soon as we get to our new home. I don't need them. I can take care of Phil all by myself. When I'm a grown-up I will never be that mean.

Peter told me we are going to a new place to live in Colorado that he thinks is called Teal Haven. He has a cool book with lots of rules for our new home but I wish it had a picture of it.

Today, I saw a sign that said Mountain Garden Center. I begged Peter to stop until he said yes! We followed a gravel road high into the mountains. It was high enough we could all get out of the RV. I was so happy. Peter even let me and Phil go with him to explore the garden center.

There was a big greenhouse but all of the plants were brown and dried up. Peter told me they died because they stopped getting water. Phil said he didn't like all the dead creepy plants, so I had to take him back to the RV. I was so mad at him, but I'm not mad anymore. Peter said there was nothing to see, anyway. He said there were a lot of dead plants and empty buildings. He did find some carrot, squash, and lettuce seeds and a small

lemon tree that was still alive. We have to find a bunch more seeds but I can't remember what they are.

We do have rabbits. Five rabbits! We only need to have four. But Phil begged to keep them all, so Peter let us. Phil likes the small brown rabbit best. He named the brown rabbit Tiger. I think that is a silly name for a brown rabbit. We also have two white rabbits, a black and white spotted one and a grey rabbit with floppy ears. I like the spotted rabbit. Her name is Spots. I will name the white rabbits Fluffy and Cloud. The grey rabbit's name is Floppy.

The rabbits were the pets of the man and woman who lived in the mountains near Tok. Vicki wanted to leave me with those people. I'm so glad Peter said no. I didn't like them. Their home was so gross with garbage everywhere. To get the rabbits we had to give them a lot of our food. They were not nice.

We are in Canada now. We're going to stop in Whitehorse next. We're slowing down. I think we are there. I have to go! Bye.

Peggy closed the book and quickly put the book and pen back into her backpack. She excitedly bounced on the sofa, forgetting to be careful not to wake Phil, and looked out the window. They drove by rows of houses as the RV turned off the main road and onto a gravel pathway. She saw many buildings in the distance. That must be Whitehorse, Peggy thought. She turned and shook Phil. "Wake up! Wake up! We're here!" Peggy said.

Phil sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked out the window.

“Is this Colorado?” Phil asked.

“No, it’s Canada,” Peggy said.

“Oh,” said Phil sleepily as he got off the sofa and picked up the brown rabbit.

They went to the front of the RV to look out the windshield.

“Is this Whitehorse?” Peggy asked Peter.

“Yes, it is. I think this road will take us to those windmills up on the mountain. Hopefully, we can get some fresh air up there.”

The gravel road turned to dirt as it rose sharply. Peggy saw two windmills on the mountain in front of them. The road began to switch back and forth, and they progressed slowly up the steep mountain. When they turned eastward, Peggy saw the city in the valley below. A large river snaked through its middle. She wondered if anyone was alive there.

“Is the air bad in this city, too?” Peggy asked.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. That is why we have to drive up as high as we can get. This city is too low. The bad air is heavy and stays low in the valleys like fog,” Peter explained.

Soon they reached a plateau and Peter parked the RV between the two windmills. He carefully cracked open his window a tiny bit and smelled the air. “It smells OK.”

Vicki immediately opened her door and got out, slamming the door behind her. Peggy looked at Peter.

“I guess she needs some time alone,” Peter said as he shrugged and opened his door. Peggy and Phil climbed over the driver’s seat and followed Peter.

Peggy looked up at the windmills. “Wow! They’re so big!”

The towering windmills were slowly turning, powered by a constant wind blowing across the mountain. Peggy’s long dark brown hair swirled in the wind and her loose-fitting pink t-shirt and shorts pressed against her body. Peggy walked toward the base of the larger windmill. She looked up and saw a dark blue word, Vestas, written on the side of the rectangular-shaped nacelle at the top of the windmill. A thick blue line extended away from the word in both directions. Three long white windmill blades were attached to the nacelle with a bullet-shaped nose at the center of the blades.

“The blades are longer than the RV!” Peggy said. She stepped up on the octagonal-shaped cement base of the Vestas windmill. Phil followed close behind her, still holding the brown rabbit. The rabbit squirmed, so Phil put it down in the long sun-dried grass.

“Will he run away?” Peggy asked.

“I don’t think so. I asked him to stay close.”

Peggy placed her hands on the giant white tube extending up from the cement base. She looked up and watched the blades turn for a few seconds. Then she walked around the tube as she slid one hand along it. Phil placed a

hand on the tube and followed behind his sister. Peggy stopped when she came to an oval-shaped door.

She read the worn plate bolted on the door: “Yukon Energy, Haeckel Hill Windmill, Erected: Fall 2000.” She told Phil, “That is a long time ago. But it looks new.”

Peter walked up and said, “It's probably been refurbished since then.”

“Can we go inside?” Peggy tried to open the door but it didn’t budge.

“No!" Peter said. “That’s not safe. Besides it looks like it’s locked.”

Peggy looked at the other windmill. It was grey and smaller but had the same shape, with a cylindrical tower and rectangular nacelle on top of the tower. It also had three long blades. Peggy noticed the mountain behind the windmills rose up even higher. She saw Vicki sitting on a rock, looking away from them. Directly behind Vicki stood a wall of grey rock. The wall of rock extended to the northeast following the curve of the mountain. It became shorter and shorter until it was covered with dirt and grass. In the other direction, the rock wall ended abruptly right behind the Vestas windmill. At the end of the rock wall, Peggy noticed a dirt path leading further up into the mountain.

“Can we go on a hike?” Peggy asked as she jumped off the cement base and started running towards the path, with Phil following close behind.

“Hold on! Come back here, Peggy!” Peter shouted as he chased after them.

Peggy and Phil stopped. “Please!” Peggy shouted back.

“No! Get back here! It’s late.”

Peggy came back, Phil next to her. She imagined she looked as sad as he did.

“Maybe tomorrow we can go exploring,” Peter said. Peggy smiled again, and saw that Phil did, too. Peter pointed out over the city. “It’s getting dark and look I think a storm might be blowing in.”

Peggy saw the dark storm clouds. Lightning streaked across them and she heard the rumblings of thunder. The wind gusted harder, pushing them back, forcing them to lean into the wind. Another flash lit up the clouds and in seconds, it was followed by booming thunder.

“I’m scared,” Phil said. He reached for his sister’s arm.

Peggy felt something brush up against her leg and looked down. The brown rabbit had its front paws on her tennis shoe and was rubbing its head on her leg. She picked it up and handed it to Phil. “I think Tiger is scared too,” she told Phil, hoping that would make him feel better.

“Boy, this isn’t the best place to be during a storm,” Peter said.

“What do you mean?” Peggy asked as another lightning bolt streaked through the sky and thunder roared again.

“Never mind,” Peter said. “You two should get back in the RV. I’m going to go talk to Vicki. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Peggy took Phil’s hand and they walked back toward the RV. They struggled to walk against the wind. Large raindrops fell all around them and they hurried. A loud crack of thunder startled them and Peggy and Phil

jumped and held onto to each other, too scared to move. Nickel-sized hail began to fall. The hail stung as it hit Peggy. She screamed and ran toward the RV, Phil right behind. They climbed in. Peggy shut the door and looked at Phil. He was shaking and holding the rabbit close to his body. Water was dripping off his short black hair and the top half of his red t-shirt was soaking wet. Peggy saw fear in his dark brown eyes.

The RV driver's door and passenger door opened and Peter and Vicki got in looking completely soaked. Peggy saw the hail bouncing off the front windshield. It was getting larger and looked as big as her fist to Peggy. A large chunk of hail struck the windshield in the center and cracked it.

"This looks … a…one," Peter said to Vicki.

Peggy couldn't hear what Peter said over the noise of the hail pounding on the RV. She went over to the sofa and looked out the window. Phil jumped on the sofa and covered himself with a blanket. Peggy shrieked as the wind rocked the RV. Now she was scared, too. There was so much noise from the wind and hail so she didn't think anyone heard her scream. Then a strange whining sound came from outside and became louder and louder. Another large gust of wind tilted the RV. It nearly fell over on its side before it slammed back down on its wheels. When the RV tilted, Peggy fell back against the sofa. She heard Phil screaming and crying under his blankets.

Before Peggy could sit back up, the whining noise suddenly changed to an explosive sound. The window she was looking out was blasted open,

spraying broken glass on her. She felt a sharp pain on her forehead. She turned over and onto her knees to brush the glass off her face and hair. Blood dripped off her forehead as she reached up to feel the wound. She looked at her hands and saw blood.

Peggy felt like crying, but knew she needed to be brave. She noticed a piece of the windmill blade sticking into the other side of the RV. She felt the RV moving and looked up to see Peter driving. Peggy ran to the front. Phil jumped off the sofa, still wrapped in his blanket, and followed Peggy. The RV rocked again, making Peggy and Phil fall to the floor. In the back of the RV, another window shattered, creating a windstorm. The wind picked up papers in the RV and whipped them all around. The lights flickered and went out.

“Stay down!” Peter shouted back to the kids.

Vicki crouched down in the passenger seat. Peggy wanted to see where they were going, and crept up behind the driver’s seat. She looked over the driver’s tan leather seat. The hail had turned into sheets of rain blowing fiercely. Peter was maneuvering the RV up against the rock wall as close as he could. As he put the RV in park, another blast of wind tilted the RV knocking it into the rock wall with a loud crunching sound. Peggy ducked down even lower behind the back of the driver’s seat. A flash of lightning hit the ground in the city below. During the flash, she saw the shape of a large tornado.

“Tornado!” Peggy shouted as she pointed toward the city.

“I’m scared!” Peggy said.

More lightning flashed and Peggy saw the tornado again as it twisted right through the middle of Whitehorse.

Vicki shrieked, “Oh, my God! We’re all going to die!”

“Let’s get out of here!” sobbed Peggy.

Peter said, “There is no place to go. The only road leads us down there” He pointed into the darkness toward the city. More lightning flashed. lighting up the tornado.

Peggy started to cry and curled herself into a little ball behind the driver’s seat. The RV rocked and groaned as the wind and rain pounded upon it. Peggy closed her eyes and tried to block all of that out of her mind. She sang a little tune, something her grandmother used to sing. “We n’ de ya ho, We n’ de ya ho, We n’ de ya.” Slowly, the wind died down and the rain softened. Peggy drifted into a deep sleep.

Chapter 6

Sunshine shone into the RV as Peggy blinked her eyes and sat up. There was a blanket on her and she wondered who had covered her up. She had slept on the floor behind the driver's seat all night. Peggy looked around and watched Vicki sweep the glass, paper and garbage off the floor. A big hole was slashed into the side of the RV with part of a windmill blade sticking in it. Phil was still asleep on the floor not too far from her. She didn't see Peter. Peggy crawled over to Phil and gently shook him.

"Wake up," Peggy said quietly.

Phil opened his eyes and sat up. He looked around with a panicked look.

"Where is he?" Phil asked still looking around.

Peggy lifted Phil's blanket and there sat his brown rabbit. Phil smiled and quickly picked him up. He looked at Peggy with wide eyes and they both got up. They went to the rabbit cage to see if they were all right. The rabbits looked fine but there was glass and bits of broken debris in their cage.

"We should clean their cage," Peggy said. "Help me carry them outside."

"Hold on Peggy," Vicki said. "Come with me to the bathroom."

Peggy stopped and suspiciously followed Vicki to the bathroom. The small bathroom felt crowded with her and Vicki in it at the same time. Vicki got out a Band-Aid and some anti-biotic ointment from the medicine cabinet. Then she opened a packet with an anti-septic pad in it. Vicki cleaned the blood off Peggy's forehead.

"Ouch! That hurts," Peggy complained.

"Hold still! Be glad it isn't too deep or you might need stitches," Vicki said looking at the cut.

Peggy didn't like the sound of getting stitches. She held still while Vicki added some ointment on her cut. Finally, Vicki put a Band-Aid on and then turned her face from one side to the other.

"You have a lot of little cuts on your face but I don't think they need Band-Aids," Vicki said as she looked Peggy over. "Do you have any other cuts?"

"No, I don't think so," Peggy said.

"OK, you can go," Vicki said.

Peggy left the bathroom and walked back to Phil. She looked at him and was amazed that he didn't have a scratch on him.

"Come on, let's get the rabbit cage outside," Peggy said.

Together they carried the cage out of the RV.There was a warm steady breeze and Peggy looked up and didn't see a cloud in the sky. She was glad the storm was gone.

“Whoa! The RV is really beat up,” Peggy said as she looked at the brown and tan RV.

The RV had dents and scratches all over it and several windows were broken. A storage door was jammed inward with a hole sliced through it. She looked down at the rabbits in the cage.

“Will they run away if we let them out?” Peggy asked Phil.

Phil put the brown rabbit down and opened the cage door. He reached in, picked up a white rabbit, and held it for a few seconds. Then he put it down and reached in to get another one.

“What are you doing? How do you know they won’t run away?” Peggy asked.

“I asked them to stay close,” Phil said.

Peggy watched as Phil got out each rabbit one by one and let them go. All of the rabbits stayed close by the RV.

“How do you know that Phil?” Peggy asked.

Phil shrugged and didn’t answer. Peggy watched the rabbits and decided they must be scared after such a bad storm. She looked around and saw garbage and debris everywhere. She was amazed at how much stuff covered the area. She looked up at the big windmill but only the bottom half of the cylindrical tube was still standing. The nacelle was smashed and on the ground near the base. She saw pieces of the blades lying near the nacelle. Peggy looked over at the smaller windmill. It was no longer turning. The nacelle was dented and twisted and one of the blades was broke in half.

It looked like something shredded the blade leaving long strings of fiberglass blowing in the wind.

“Let’s look around. We can clean the cage later,” Peggy said as she started making her way through the debris towards the large windmill.

Peggy saw something red under a pile of debris near the large windmill. She wondered what it was.

“Peggy, be careful!” Peter said as he came out from around the back of the RV.

Peggy stopped and looked back.

“Hi Peter!” Peggy said as she smiled and waved. “Look at all the garbage! I want to see what I can find.”

“There is probably a lot of sharp stuff, so please watch what you touch,” Peter told her. “And don’t go too far. I need to work on the RV to get it fixed and sealed again.”

“OK,” Peggy said.

Peggy and Phil walked through the debris stopping to look at different things. Peggy found a seven of hearts playing card and threw it aside. Then Phil found a small toy car. When they reached the red thing, Peggy picked it up and held up a sparkling red dress but it was too big for her. She was amazed it wasn’t torn.

“Too bad it won’t fit me. It’s really pretty,” Peggy said as she threw it back on the ground.

Peggy and Phil slowly grew tired of searching through the debris after finding nothing more that interested them. They decided to go back to the RV and watch Peter work. When they got there, Peter was about to put on a gas mask.

“I have to go down into the city. I might be gone for a while. I need to find some supplies to fix the RV,” Peter told the kids.

“Can I go?” Peggy asked.

“No, sorry. We only have one gas mask. Before I leave, I want to show you two something. Follow me,” Peter told the kids as he walked to the back of the RV.

Peggy watched as he opened a small compartment door and pulled out a showerhead.

“The water in the RV doesn’t work with the power out but you can get drinking water from here. Hold the showerhead low and water will come out,” Peter said as he turned a knob and showed them a trickle of water coming out. “But, don’t waste the water. I don’t know when we will find fresh water to refill our tank.”

“OK,” Peggy said as she watched Peter put the showerhead away.

“I have to leave now so be good and try not to bother Vicki. She is going to lie down for a while because she is not feeling well. So, play quietly and I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“I’m hungry,” Peggy said.

“Me too,” Phil agreed.

“Why don’t you get some cereal for now and I’m sure Vicki will make you some lunch later,” Peter said.

Peter kissed and hugged the kids goodbye as he said, “Be good!”

“We will,” Peggy and Phil said as they watched Peter put on the gas mask and walk down the road towards the city.

“Wait here, I’ll get the box of cereal,” Peggy told Phil.

Phil nodded and Peggy went back to the RV and quietly climbed inside. She saw Vicki sleeping on the queen-sized bed in the back of the RV. She opened a cupboard and grabbed a box of Cheerios. Before she left the RV, she went over to her backpack. Pieces of glass slid off as she opened the backpack. She pulled out a long slender bag made out of green cloth. It had a tie string at the top opening and a shoulder strap. Peggy put the bag on her shoulder and went outside. She and Phil walked over to one of the windmill blades that was lying on the ground. A large section of the blade was still smooth and only slightly damaged so they could sit on it. They began to eat the Cheerios and look out over the valley. Peggy could no longer see Peter but she saw smoke rising from several areas of the city. After a few handfuls of cereal, she took the green cloth bag off her shoulder and opened it. She pulled out a polished cedar Native American flute. It had a small wooden hawk tied to the top of it with leather strings. Peggy began to play an upbeat cheerful song. Phil smiled at Peggy as she played her flute. After a short tune, Peggy quit to eat some more cereal. The brown rabbit hopped over to Phil’s feet. He tossed it a couple of Cheerios. It

nibbled on one of the Cheerios. Peggy watched it eat and then started playing another song. Peggy thought the other rabbits liked her music since they all hopped over to join them. Phil threw out a handful of Cheerios for them all to eat. Suddenly, a black-capped chickadee flew in and landed on Phil's shoulder. It startled Peggy and she stopped playing to look at the bird.

"A bird! A bird that's still alive," Peggy said amazed.

They watched it for a moment. Peggy thought it was a cute little bird. It looked like it was wearing a black hat and bib to Peggy. It had white patches under each eye and a gray back and tail. Light rusty brown feathers were on its belly.

"He's hungry. He wants seeds or bugs," Phil said while looking at the chickadee.

"Ewww, we don't have any bugs," Peggy said disgusted. "Besides how do you know? Maybe he would like some Cheerios?"

"I just know. I can see it. It showed me a picture in my mind, of him eating seeds and some kind of bug," Phil said.

"Really? Can I try?" Peggy asked.

"Sure," Phil said as he looked at the chickadee.

In a moment, the chickadee turned and looked at Peggy. Then it hopped over to her shoulder. Peggy jumped a little and smiled at the chickadee. Peggy waited but she didn't see any pictures.

"I can't see anything," Peggy said.

“You have to relax like you are about to fall asleep and look at the bird,” Phil explained.

Peggy tried again. She stared at the bird and tried to feel sleepy. Only Peggy was not sleepy and and all she thought about was going exploring. She wanted to go see where the trail led. Maybe they could sneak away while Vicki was sleeping. The chickadee flew off Peggy’s shoulder and landed on piece of broken wood nearby.

“I can’t do it. I didn’t see anything,” Peggy said frustrated.

Peggy didn’t feel like playing her flute any more so she put it back in the cloth bag and slung it onto her shoulder.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Peggy said as she closed the box of cereal.

“All right,” Phil said as he got up.

Phil reached down and petted the brown rabbit.

“Can you talk to them too?” Peggy asked.

“I don’t talk to them. I picture what I want them to do. They seem to understand. It seems like I have to touch them for it to work,” Phil said.

“Oh, so that is how you get them to listen. Don’t tell Vicki you can do that. She wouldn’t understand. Come on, let’s go,” said Peggy.

Peggy led the way towards the trail stepping around and over piles of debris. They reached the trail and followed it as it rose higher leading to a rounded peak above. There was less and less debris as they followed the trail. The little chickadee followed them landing nearby to watch them as

they walked. When they reached the top of the hill, they saw the trail continue downward into a dip before going up the mountain even higher.

“Kids!” Vicki shouted.

Peggy and Phil looked at each other in surprise.

“We better get back, quick,” said Peggy.

They ran down the trail with the chickadee flying close behind them. Vicki was waiting for them with her arms crossed looking upset. When the chickadee saw Vicki, it turned and flew off in the other direction. Peggy was relieved that Vicki didn’t notice the chickadee.

“I thought Peter told you to stay close,” Vicki said.

“We just went for a walk,” Peggy said.

“Don’t you talk back to me young lady! Now get that cereal put away,” Vicki told Peggy as she pointed at the box of cereal sitting on the windmill blade. “I’m not feeling good and I need your help. I want you two to finish cleaning the RV.”

Peggy and Phil moaned in response but followed Vicki back to the RV. As they passed the rabbit cage, Peggy stopped and asked, “Can we clean the rabbit cage first?”

Vicki looked at Peggy and down at the cage, “Very well, but be quick about it. I want the RV cleaned up. I’ll be resting in the bedroom so don’t be too loud.”

After hours of cleaning, Peggy and Phil sat down on the sofa bed to rest.

“I think we’re done,” Peggy said looking around.

The rabbit cage was clean and back inside the RV. The rest of the RV looked clean enough Peggy thought.

“I’m starving!” Phil whined.

“Me too!” Peggy agreed.

She got up and opened the refrigerator. The light didn’t turn on leaving it darkened inside. There was a headless plucked chicken wrapped in clear plastic and a plastic container with a lid on it. She pulled it the container and opened it. It looked like partially melted butter.

“Here, put this on the table,” Peggy said as she handed Phil the butter.

Peggy looked back in the refrigerator and opened a drawer. It was empty. There was nothing else in the refrigerator. Peggy didn’t know how to cook a chicken so she closed the refrigerator. She looked in a cabinet for more food and found a bag of flour and a bag of sugar. In another cabinet, she found a bag of potatoes and a box of uncooked rice. Peggy sighed and thought if only she knew how to cook, she would make something really good to eat.Since she couldn’t find anything else to eat so she grabbed the box of Cheerios and the sugar and put them on the table. Peggy got out two bowls and spoons and poured the cereal in the bowls. Then she scooped half the softened butter on Phil’s cereal and half on hers. Peggy sprinkled sugar on them and mixed them up.

“There! Lunch is served,” Peggy said.

Phil looked skeptical at Peggy but decided to try it. He scooped up a spoonful and ate it.

“Mmmm, this is good!” Phil said with his mouth still full.

Peggy smiled and started eating. As they were eating, the chickadee flew in through the broken window and landed on Phil’s shoulder. Peggy and Phil smiled.

“Looks like we have a friend,” Peggy said. “Can you ask him to stay?”

Phil nodded and looked at the chickadee as he chewed his cereal.

“Only we better keep him hidden. I don’t think Vicki will let us keep him,” Peggy said.

“Where can we hide him?” Phil asked.

Peggy answered, “How about in one of the cabinets? We can put a small bowl of water and some carrot seeds in there with him,”

She got up and opened one of the upper cabinets. She took a stack of plates out and moved them to another cabinet and then pushed the cups to one side to make room. She got out a small bowl and then went to the sink and turned on the faucet. Nothing came out.

“No water!” Peggy said surprised.

After a minute of thinking, she remembered the outside shower that Peter had told them about.

“I’ll be right back,” Peggy said as she took the bowl and went out the RV.

She went to the rear of the RV to fill the bowl with water.. After filling the bowl, she went back in the RV and placed the bowl of water in the cabinet. Then she opened a drawer and pulled out a packet of carrot seeds. There were several packets of carrot seeds and lettuce seeds in the drawer. Peggy thought Peter wouldn't miss one packet of seeds. She opened it and poured the small light brown seeds into her hand. The chickadee flew over to her hand at once and looked at the seeds. It picked up a seed with its beak and ate it.

"He likes them," Peggy said as she smiled.

She put her hand up to the cabinet and the chickadee jumped off her hand and into the cabinet. Peggy dumped the seeds in the cabinet and watched as the chickadee ate them. Slowly, she closed the cabinet door and smiled.

"There, now he has a home," Peggy said as she returned to the table.

After Peggy finished eating, she felt tired and decided to lie down on the sofa bed. Phil joined her and they soon fell asleep.

Peggy woke to the sound of an engine. She got up and looked out the window. A rusty old red pickup truck was coming up the dirt road. The bed of the truck was packed full of things. The truck reached the plateau and stopped when too much debris blocked the road. The engine stopped and Peter got out of the truck. Peggy got up and ran out of the RV excited to see what Peter had brought them.

“Peter!” Peggy shouted as she gave him a big hug. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Peter hugged Peggy and smiled.

“I found a lot of stuff we can use,” Peter said.

“Show me!” Peggy said.

“Hold on, first I need to check on Vicki. How is she feeling? And where is Phil?” Peter asked.

“Phil and Vicki are in the RV sleeping,” Peggy said.

Just then, Vicki came out of the RV.

“How are you feeling,” Peter asked Vicki as he walked up to her.

“I feel a little bit better. The kids woke me up a few times so I didn’t get much sleep,” Vicki said.

Peggy thought Vicki had slept all day but decided not to say anything.

“Sorry, honey. Well, you should see what I found in Whitehorse,” Peter said as they walked to the back of the truck.

“Check out this power tool,” Peter said as he pulled out a battery-operated power drill. “Plus, I found duct tape and a big roll of thick clear plastic we can use to seal up the broken windows,” Peter said cheerfully.

Vicki and Peggy watched quietly looking at the piles of tools, duct tape and construction material. Peggy wondered why he needed so many tools.

“Oh yes, here is an old-fashioned oil lantern. We might need this since we don’t have electric in the RV any more. There is so much damage. I’m not sure I can fix it,” Peter said and handed the golden lantern to Vicki.

“Couldn’t you find a flashlight?” Vicki asked as she looked at the old lantern with a funny look on her face.

Peter shook his head no, as he said, “The tornado really made a mess of the city. There wasn’t much left. I hope that we will find something better at the next city. However, I did find some food. Come with me”

He walked to the cab of the truck. Vicki and Peggy followed him.

“Here, you go,” he said as he pulled out a box of food and handed it to Vicki.

Vicki smiled and said, “Thank God. For a second, I thought you didn’t even look for food.”

Peggy watched as Vicki took the box of food and lantern back to the RV. Peggy looked back at Peter hoping he had found something for her.

“Oh, I found something you and Phil might like,” Peter said as he reached in the truck and pulled out a big bag of gummy bears.

“Wow! Thanks! Can I eat some now?” Peggy asked.

“Sure, but not too many or you’ll get a stomach ache,” Peter said.

Peggy opened the bag and put a couple of gummy bears in her mouth. Then she ran back to the RV hopping over piles of debris on the way. She opened the door and climbed in. Vicki was looking through the box of food

and placing things on the counter. Peggy was worried she might find the chickadee so she set the bag of gummies on the counter.

“Can I help you put the food away?” Peggy said as she grabbed a box a cereal.

“Sure,” Vicki said.

Peggy put the fruity loops cereal in the cabinet next to the box of Cheerios. Then she quickly went back to get more food. Peggy put away a can of corn, a can of chicken noodle soup, a jar of pickles and a large bottle of olive oil.

“What’s the hurry?” Vicki asked Peggy.

“I’m not in a hurry. I want to help you get done so you can rest,” Peggy lied.

After they put all the food away, Vicki went back outside. Relieved that Vicki was gone, Peggy cracked opened the cabinet where the chickadee was hidden. She peeked in and saw the chickadee open its eyes. It looked at her for a moment and closed its eyes again. Oh, good she thought he is sleeping. She closed the cabinet and grabbed a handful of gummies before closing the bag and putting it away. She went back outside while still chewing on gummy bears.

*** Section Break ***

For the while, Peggy watched Peter and Vicki work on the RV. They cut and taped plastic over the broken windows first. Then they worked on fixing the big hole in the side of the RV. Soon Phil woke up and joined Peggy.

“Are you going to get the oven working again?” Vicki asked Peter.

Peter stopped working and said, “I don’t think I can Vicki. The solar panels are ruined and most of the wires have been severed. It looks like we will have to do without power in RV.”

“No electric? No, hot showers or running water? And how will I cook?” Vicki asked distressed.

“We will have to build a fire,” he said.

“What!? I can’t do that. I’ve never even been camping,” Vicki said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help. For now, can you and the kids gather any wood, sticks and paper you can find and make a pile? Then clear an area of debris for the fire, OK?” Peter said.

Peggy and Phil were happy to have something to do so they jumped up to help Vicki. They gathered the sticks, wood and paper while Vicki cleared an area of the debris. Peter got a shovel out of the back of the pickup truck and came over to help. He dug out a large circle of grass in the middle of the area that Vicki had cleared. After he was done digging the circle, he stabbed the shovel into the grass near the circle so it would stand up by itself. Then he found a piece of fiberglass from the windmill and pushed it into the ground around the circle to create a fire ring.

“Peggy and Phil, I want to teach you how to build a fire,” Peter said. “So, pay attention.”

Peggy was excited to help. Her grandmother had tried to teach her but that was so long ago. Phil looked eager to learn as well. Vicki sat down on the grass to watch.

“First, get some paper,” Peter said as he grabbed a piece of paper from the pile that Peggy and Phil had made. “Crumple it up into a ball and put it in the center of the circle.”

Peggy and Phil grabbed some paper and crumpled it up into a ball. Then they tossed their paper into the circle next to Peter’s paper.

After they had made a big pile of crumpled paper, Peggy asked, “Can we light it?”

“Not yet. We need cardboard and small sticks. Break up big sticks, rip up the cardboard into small pieces, and pile them on top of the paper. After that, we’ll add bigger and bigger pieces of wood. We want the smallest, thinnest pieces of wood on the bottom, like paper and the biggest pieces of wood on top,” Peter told the kids as he helped add wood to the fire.

“Can I light it?” Peggy asked after they were done adding wood into the circle.

“OK, but let me help you,” Peter said as he took out a pack of matches from his jean short’s pocket.

He handed them to Peggy. Peter showed Peggy how to light a match and then let her try. Peggy bent down by the pile of wood. After a few times striking the match and it still didn't light, she looked at Peter.

"You have to push the tip of the match firmly against the rough strip to get it to light," Peter told her.

Peggy got a new match and tried again. This time it lit on the first strike. She held the flame under a piece of paper that was sticking out at the bottom of the woodpile. It caught on fire and quickly spread to the rest of the pile. Soon the fire was blazing hot and crackling. Everyone had to back away from the heat of the fire.

Peter said, "We will have to let the wood burn down into coals before we can cook on it."

He went to the truck, pulled out a thin metal rod, and walked back to the fire.

"You can cook the chicken on this rod like a rotisserie," Peter told Vicki.

Peter bent one end of the rod to create a handle for turning it. Then he set it on the ground near the fire and went back to the truck. Peggy watched Peter as he pulled out some boards from the bed of the pickup truck and began building two cradle stands to hold the rod across the fire. After he was done, he put them next to the metal rod and away from the fire.

“I will help you set them up when the fire dies down. Are you too tired to help me finish the work on the RV Vicki?” Peter asked.

“No, I’m fine. I can help,” Vicki answered.

While Peter and Vicki went back to work on the RV, Peggy and Phil sat on the grass and watched the fire burn. The rabbits hopped over to be near them. The sun was setting behind the mountains creating a beautiful red and orange sky. Peggy thought about playing her flute and went back to the RV to get it. She came back to the fire and began playing a soothing mellow song.

When most of the wood burned down, Peter helped Vicki put the chicken on the rod and set it on the stands to cook over the fire. They also wrapped four potatoes in aluminum foil and placed them on the red-hot coals near the edge of the fire. Everyone sat quietly watching the fire while they waited for the food to cook. They listened to the crackle and pop of the fire mixed with the sound of Peggy’s music. Blue and green aurora borealis began to dance across the darkening sky. When Peggy saw the lights in the sky, she stopped playing to admire them for a while. No matter how many times she saw the lights she couldn’t get enough of them. She thought they were so beautiful. A full moon was rising above the mountains to the west. Everything was going to be all right she thought and began to play another song. Soon the chicken was browned and ready to eat. It smelled so good.

“I’ll get some plates,” Vicki said as she got up.

“No! Ur…I’ll get them. Aren’t you still sick?” Peggy said as she put her flute down and quickly got up.

Vicki stopped in surprise and looked at Peggy.

“That’s nice of you Peggy,” Peter said and smiled at her.

Vicki sat back down and said, “What is she up to?”

“She’s just trying to be nice,” Peter said.

Peggy quickly checked on the little chickadee. It was still sleeping. She grabbed plates, silverware, cups and napkins and went out the door. Peggy gave Vicki the plates, silverware and napkins but she kept the cups.

Peggy asked, “Phil, can you help me fill these cups with water?”

He nodded and got up. They filled the cups with water, and carried them back to the fire. No one talked as they ate and ate until nothing was left. It was the best tasting chicken and baked potato Peggy had ever eaten

After finishing his chicken, Peter said, “We should hit the road tomorrow morning. I’d like to leave as soon as the sun rises.”

“Awe, can’t we stay a while?” Peggy asked.

“No, we have to keep moving. We don’t know what trouble lies ahead and can’t be late,” Peter said.

Vicki added, “I for one will be happy to get going again. I’m anxious to get there and get settled into our new home.”

“Yeah, and get rid of us,” Peggy sneered at her.

“Peggy!” Peter snapped at her.

Peggy looked at Peter and decided not to say anything else.

“It’s bed time for you two,” Peter said

Peggy and Phil groaned.

Peggy asked, “Can’t we stay up a little later? It’s so nice out.”

Peter answered, “No, it’s after midnight. I don’t need a couple of crabby kids all day tomorrow.”

“All right,” Peggy said as she put her flute away and got up.

Phil and Peggy gave Peter and Vicki a hug and kiss. Phil picked up his brown rabbit. Peggy decided to carry the spotted rabbit. The other three rabbits followed behind as they slowly walked towards the RV. The RV looked dark and scary to Peggy so she turned around and they went back to the glow of the fire.

“I’m scared,” Peggy said to Peter. “It’s so dark.”

Peter got up and said, “All right, I’ll go with you and light the lantern.”

“Be careful,” he said as he walked them to the RV avoiding debris on the way.

Inside the RV, Peggy could barely see it was so dark. Suddenly, Peter lit a match and tried to light the lantern’s wick. It caught on fire but went out. Peter lit another match as he opened a lower cabinet and then another until he found the olive oil.

“Ouch,” Peter said as he shook out the match he was holding.

“Are you OK?” Phil asked.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Peter said in the dark. “Peggy, I need your help. Can you hold a match for me? I think the lantern is out of oil. I should have thought of this earlier,” Peter said.

Peggy got up and felt her way to Peter. When she found him, she felt him put a match and the pack of matches in her hands.

“Can you light it?” Peter asked.

Peggy felt for the rough strip and struck the match across it. The match lit. She held it up for Peter as he quickly opened the lantern’s cap and poured in the olive oil.

“Hopefully, this oil will burn,” he said.

Peter blew out the match before it burned Peggy’s fingers. Then he took the pack of matches and lit the wick again and it stayed lit. The lantern cast a warm glowing light in the RV that made Peggy feel happy. She thought it was like having her own little fire.

“Are you going to be OK?” Peter asked.

They nodded yes.

“Goodnight then. Sweet dreams,” Peter told them and left.

Peggy put the rabbits back in their cage except one. Phil cuddled up with his rabbit on the sofa bed. Peggy laid down on the sofa bed next to Phil and covered up. They quickly fell asleep.

Chapter 7

The excitement of traveling was wearing off for Solana. It was the third day on the road and Solana they were only in Peru. The noise from the windshield wipers was driving her crazy. They were swishing back and forth, back and forth at full speed, yet she could barely see the road in front of her. It had been raining hard since yesterday. Luckily, the flooded areas on the road were easy to drive through and didn't stop them. Fog shrouded the Andes Mountains that surrounded them. Solana wanted to get out of the truck and go for a walk but her mother was afraid she would get sick. She had been stuck in the truck all day. Solana shifted her weight trying to stretch and find a comfortable way to sit. There was not much room sitting between her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother was leaning her head against the passenger window sleeping. She looked at her mother who was driving the truck.

"Are you tired Mama? I can drive for a while if you'd like," Solana said.

"I'm fine. Why don't you try to take a nap?" Esperanza said.

"I already did that. I can't sleep any more. Can we stop somewhere so I can get out and stretch a while?"

"We're not far from Cusco. We can find a place to stop there," Esperanza said.

Solana looked at the driver's side window and watched droplets of water streaming towards the back of the truck. She looked out beyond the droplets and at the misty mountains. She saw a small house in a field at the base of the mountain. She wondered if anyone was still living there. She hadn't seen any other survivors since they left her Uncle's home. Somehow, she imagined traveling to the United States would be more exciting. She was so bored and anxious to get somewhere different. She was tired of being in the Andes. How much longer was it going to take to get to the United States she wondered?

"Shouldn't we be searching for seeds?" Solana asked as she looked out the window watching as they got closer to the base of the mountains.

Esperanza glanced at her daughter, "Do you have any idea where we should search?"

"How about we stop at Lima and check? Maybe the west side of South America didn't flood," Solana said.

Esperanza replied, "Maybe, but we don't have a lot of time so I don't think we can afford to take too many side trips."

"But we have to find…" Solana stopped talking when she saw something moving down the mountain ahead of them. She leaned forward to try to see through the steamy rain-droplet covered windows. Esperanza looked at Solana to see why she didn't finish her sentence.

"What is it?" Esperanza said and she looked out the window to see what Solana was looking at.

Esperanza slammed on the breaks just as Solana realized she was seeing a mudslide. The truck slid across the wet pavement and into the path of the mudslide. Marina woke and grabbed Solana's hand without saying a word. The mud hit the side of the truck, lifted it and pushed it sideways across the road. Solana hung on as the truck turned to face the mudslide. A large rock smacked into the rear quarter panel of the truck with a loud crack and forced the truck to turn even more. Solana saw the horse trailer jack-knifed beside them. She heard the horse's long and loud frightened whinnies from the trailer. Mud filled with rocks, tree roots and logs flowed all around them dragging them off the road. There seemed to be an endless river of mud that poured off the mountain. The truck jarred to a sudden stop but the mud continued to flow past. She watched breathlessly to see if they were going to be buried alive as the mud and debris increased. Another rock slammed into the truck breaking it free and pushed it another few feet before it came to a stop again. The truck had turned far enough that Solana saw that the other two trucks were also caught in the mudslide. After several agonizing minutes, the mud finally slowed down and Solana started to relax. Esperanza, Marina and her sat in silence looking at the mud surrounding them.

"Is everyone all right?" Marcos asked over the communicator radio.

Esperanza reached down, pushed the talk button, and said, "Yes, we're fine here."

Ramiro replied over the radio, "We're alive anyway. Now what?"

No one replied.

“What if more mud comes out of the mountain?” Solana asked her mother.

Esperanza looked at Solana, nodded and pushed the talk button, “This might not be the end of the mud. If we stay here too long we could end up buried.”

After a few seconds, Marcos replied through the radio, “You’re right, but there is no way we’re going to get these vehicles out of this mud.”

Even though Ramiro’s truck was near the edge of the mudslide, it was still surrounded by deep mud. If only she had told her mother to stop when she first saw the mudslide Solana thought. Then they could have stopped before they drove into the path of the mudslide and turned around and found another route. More mud started to flow around them making the level rise even higher.

“We need to get out of here!” Solana said scared.

“I agree,” Esperanza said.

Ramiro said over the radio, “The city, Cusco is just around bend, let’s get the animals and head into the city.”

Marcos added over the radio, “Pack everything essential and get the horses saddled. Esperanza, wait in your trailer. We will be coming your way. We should cross together.”

Solana watched as her father opened his truck door. The door scraped across the top of the mud and hit a rock. He opened the door just enough to

squeeze out and step into the mud. He sank knee deep. Lukas also got out and sank into the mud. They struggled to walk through the mud. Lukas tried to walk on a log but he slipped off and landed face first into the mud. Marcos helped him back up. Lukas tried hopelessly to clean the mud off his face. He soon gave up so they continued to make their way to the back of the trailer.

“Solana, stay here! Marina and I will pack what we need. Save your strength for crossing the mud,” Esperanza said as she gestured out across a wide stretch of mud in front of them.

Esperanza and Marina tried to open the truck doors but they wouldn’t budge. They opened their windows and looked out. Solana leaned over towards Marina to see as well. The mud was about halfway up the truck door.

“Looks like we’re going to have to climb out through the windows,” Esperanza said.

Solana watched them struggle to climb out the window only to sink down into the mud. Marina held onto the front of the truck as she made her way to the trailer. Solana wondered if she would even fit through the window with her big belly. She watched the rain come in through the open windows. She thought it didn’t matter since they were going to leave the trucks and most of their belongings. Solana was tired of sitting in the truck. She was tired of being protected. She decided to try to get out of the truck. She scooted over to the driver’s side. After a moment, she turned and put

her feet up on the front seat and pulled herself up into the window. She used her feet to help push her weight up. Now she was sitting on the window edge with her feet in the truck. It was still raining hard but at least it was not cold she thought. Solana looked down at the mud and wished she didn't have to step into it. There was no rock or log close enough to step onto. She thought of how Lukas slipped right off a log anyway. It seemed to her she was going to have to muck through the deep mud.

"Here goes," Solana said to herself.

She scooted her butt further out the window and turned to get one foot out the window. That wasn't too hard she thought as she sat straddling the window. Solana grimaced preparing herself for the mud and stepped down into it. Her foot sank deep into the water-soaked muck. As she pulled her other foot out of the truck, she leaned back too far. Her hands slipped off the truck and she fell back sitting down into the mud. She was slowly sinking. She tried to stand up but could not so she rolled over to get on her hands and knees. As she turned herself over, her arms sunk into the mud up to her elbows. As she continued to struggled, she sank deeper into the mud. She thought she might drown and looked around for help but everyone was already in the trailers.

"Help!" she cried.

Solana's face was barely above the mud but she stopped sinking. No one came to help her. There was a log just out of her reach. If she could get to the log, she could hang onto it as she made her way to the trailer. She

pulled an arm out of the mud and tried to crawl forward. Her other arm sunk even deeper. Just before her face hit the mud, Solana turned her head so she could breathe. Slowly she belly crawled forward across the mud. Solana spit out mud as she reached out and grabbed the log. She pulled herself closer to the log and managed to get up on her knees. She crawled on her knees alongside the log towards the trailer. She managed to get back on her feet near the end of the log. At last, she reached out and grabbed onto the side of the trailer. She regretted getting into the mud now. Her mother was going to be furious when she saw her. There was no turning back now so Solana continued along the side of the trailer until she reached the back and saw the ramp door open. Gratefully, she climbed onto the ramp and sat down.

“Solana!” Marina said.

“Sorry Grandma, I really wanted to help.”

Marina grabbed a muddy towel and handed it to Solana. Solana was happy to wipe off some of the mud from her face and hands. She looked at Marina who was covered in mud. Marina had a big blob of mud on her head making her hair stick up. Solana had never seen her grandmother look so ridiculous. She couldn’t hold back and began to laugh.

“You think I look bad. You should see yourself,” Marina said and laughed as she pulled a gob of mud off her legs and flung it at Solana. The mud missed Solana and hit the male dog on his side and stuck with a splat.

Solana grabbed some mud and flung it back at her grandmother as she laughed.

Esperanza came over and shook her head. “Come on Solana, you might as well help pack.”

Solana still smiling got up and walked into the trailer. She looked down and noticed her canvas shoes were gone.

“Oh, I lost my shoes!” Solana said.

Esperanza looked down at Solana’s bare feet.

“Good thing we gave you those moon shoes,” Esperanza said.

By the time they finished packing, there was mud all over the inside of the trailer. Still Solana hated to leave the trailer because now they would truly be homeless. Solana reminded herself that they actually do have a home waiting for them. She imagined a nice ranch house with a sign in the front yard saying, “Welcome Home Solana Gonzalez and Family!” This gave Solana some of her energy back, which she was going to need to cross that mud again. Marcos and Lukas joined them with the four Llamas. With their large feet, the llamas were crossing the mud with no problem. Solana helped put more things into the side packs of the llamas. Then she sat in the rain hoping it would wash off some of the mud. Soon, Ramiro, Irene and Jose joined them with their horses. Jose rode on one of the horses since he was small enough for the horses to carry him through the mud. Ramiro and Irene held onto their horses for support while they trudged through the mud.

Solana put on her new moon shoes and tied them extra tight. She didn't want to lose her last pair of shoes. She hated the idea of getting her beautiful silver moon shoes all muddy. However, she was hoping the low-gravity would make it easier to cross the mud.

"Is everyone ready?" Marcos asked.

Everyone nodded looking solemn. Solana reached down and turned on her moon shoes. The light zipped around her shoes and went out.

Marcos cleared his throat and said, "Esperanza and I will lead the group. Solana and Marina will follow us and then Jose, and Lukas. Irene and Ramiro will be last. Does everyone agree?"

"Sounds good, let's get going," Ramiro said.

Marcos and Esperanza took their horse by the reins and led the way through the mud. Their horses struggled and fought them as the mud became deeper.

"Lukas, I think you are light enough to ride your horse," Ramiro said as he waited his turn to leave the trailer.

"I can walk," Lukas said.

Marina and Solana looked at each other knowing it was their turn. Tentatively, Solana stepped off the trailer while she held onto her horse. Solana's foot sunk up to her ankle. She put her other foot in and she was amazed. It was as if she was walking on water. The mud grabbed onto her shoes and tried to keep her feet in the mud making it difficult to walk but it was better than crawling through it. She looked over to see her

grandmother step out into the mud. She was wearing a pair of homemade snowshoes. Esperanza managed to find enough supplies to make one pair of snowshoes after they were finished packing. Marina sunk into the mud a little deeper than Solana. Marina walked awkwardly with the snowshoes but she quickly adjusted. Together they followed behind Esperanza and Marcos. Solana glanced back and saw Lukas and Jose following behind. Lukas struggled to walk in the mud. Jose hung onto his horse as it instinctively followed Solana's horse. The three dogs whined at the edge of the trailer's ramp as they paced back and forth. Marcos whistled and they jumped into the mud sinking up to their bellies. They hopped and crawled through the mud following Lukas and Jose.

The group changed their direction a few times to go around large piles of debris. Luckily, the mud didn't get much deeper. The rain slowed down so that Solana could hear the sound of rushing water. She looked ahead and saw a river flowing down the middle of the mudslide. Esperanza, Marcos and Jose stopped at the edge to wait for Lukas to catch up. He had fallen behind making Irene and Ramiro fall behind as well.

"Let's cross this river one at a time," Marcos said when everyone caught up.

Marcos carefully stepped out into the fast flowing muddy river and held his position. Water splashed up around his legs as he stood there. He took another step bringing his horse with him as he went. Then in two more steps, he was across making it look easy. He reached his hand out to

Esperanza who stepped out into the water. She stepped carefully and grabbed Marcos' hand.

"Esperanza, hold my hand so we can make a chain to help the others cross," Marcos said as he stepped back out into the river.

Marina went next and slipped just as she grabbed Marcos' hand. He held onto her and helped her to the other side. Solana was ready. She put one foot out into the water, which seemed steady so she shifted her weight onto it. Her foot slipped and she fell into the river. Her hands were ripped from her horses' reins. She slid down the river with surprising speed. Solana flailed frantically trying to get her head above the rushing water but she was moving too fast. Instinctively, she rolled and tried to grab onto the mud on the side of the river. The mud was too slippery to hold onto but she managed to lift her head enough to gasp for air. Then she hit a log and clung to it as she tried to catch her breath. After a she stopped choking, she managed to crawl up out of the river and sit in the mud. She looked around trying to find her family but she couldn't see anyone. Solana noticed by pure luck that she managed to end up on the right side of the river. Her leg hurt and she looked down to see a cut on her thigh. It was bleeding but didn't look like a deep cut. Her clothes were torn in several places but she was all right and felt lucky to be alive.

"Mama! Papa!" Solana shouted.

There was no answer so she got up and tried to walk. Solana was grateful that the moon shoes were still working. She looked up the mudslide

and saw her horse, Sunflower Magic making her way through the mud towards her. Solana smiled and called to her. Solana felt much better with her horse nearby. She decided to head towards the edge of the mud instead of trying to go back up the mudslide towards her family.

At last, she reached the edge of the mud and stepped onto solid ground. Solana never wanted to see mud again. She was so tired she got on her horse to ride to her family. She struggled to get up on Sunflower Magic with her belly in the way and it was difficult to swing her leg over but she managed. She was so used to riding horses that she felt comfortable once she was on Sunflower Magic.

Her family was not far. They had just gotten off the mud as she arrived. She saw that Marcos was missing and Lukas had given up walking and was rode his horse. She wondered if he rode his horse across the river after seeing her swept away.

Esperanza reached up to hug her daughter as she exclaimed, “Solana! I’m so glad you’re OK. Marcos is looking for you.”

Solana replied, “I thought I was going to drown but, I hit a log and managed to climb out. I hurt my leg,”

“God must be with you Solana,” Marina said but frowned at the blood oozing out of the cut in her leg. “Let me take care of that.”

Marina opened a pack on one of the llamas and pulled out a small towel, a tube of medicine, gauze pads and tape. Solana forced herself to stay quiet as her grandmother vigorously cleaned her cut. Finally, Marina

was satisfied that the cut was clean and applied some ointment from a little tube. It took three of the gauze pads to cover the long cut.

Marcos rode his horse up to the group as he shouted, “Solana! Are you OK?”

“I guess so,” Solana replied.

Marcos said, “I went to the bottom of the mudslide and didn’t see you so I hoped you found a way out of the river.”

Solana replied, “Yes, I did. And I’m never going through mud again!”

“Me neither,” Jose agreed.

“You didn’t even get in the mud,” Lukas said.

Jose replied, “Yeah, well my hands are killing me from holding onto my horse so tight. There was no way I was going to end up in that mud.”

Everyone but Jose was covered in mud and looked miserable. However, there was nothing they could do about it. They all mounted up to head for Cusco with the llamas tied off behind them.

Chapter 8

The sun was setting and Solana imagined finding a dry, comfortable place to lie down and sleep. They rounded a corner in the road and saw Cusco in front of them. Solana was so happy it was not far and wondered if she could even find some dry clothes. Solana's hope faded as they approached the dark and ominous city. The houses were closer together but were badly damaged. Solana looked at a house that had no windows or doors left on it. She saw holes in the walls. It looked like bullet holes were all over the outside of the house. Everyone was quiet while they looked around. Solana felt the hair on her neck raise up and stopped her horse. Everyone else stopped but didn't say anything. The dogs quietly growled as they stood sniffing the air.

Solana said fearfully, "Something is wrong with this city. I don't want to go in there."

"There is no way around Solana. Don't worry we will protect you," Ramiro said as he untied the shotgun from the side of his horse and held it up for Solana to see. Lukas decided to get his crossbow out and held it up high too.

"Yes, we will protect you," Lukas said and he moved his black horse closer to Solana.

Everyone was looking at Solana. She felt embarrassed that everyone might be thinking she was just a scared little girl. She looked past her family at the dark and misty ruins of Cusco. She knew they should turn around. It felt all wrong to her. Yet, if they turn around, they would have to cross the mud again. There was no way she was going to do that. The rain was washing the mud off her face. She turned her face up to the sky and opened her mouth to get a bit of water to drink. She swished it around and spit it out in an effort to get the last of the gritty dirt out of her mouth. There was a rumbling of distant thunder and the rain suddenly changed from a light drizzle to a heavy down pour.

Esperanza broke the silence, “Let’s keep going but keep alert for danger.”

Ramiro nodded and nudged his horse into a walk. The two llamas tied to his horse pulled back against the rope trying to resist moving towards the city. This didn’t help Solana feel any better. She watched as the llamas tied to her father’s horse were also pulling against the ropes. Soon everyone was guiding their horses down the cement street towards Cusco. Solana hesitated to follow them but she didn’t like the idea of being left alone. She decided it was the best choice and urged her reluctant horse forward.

Solana thought the buildings on each side of her used to be stores. Most of them were falling down in piles of rubble. The walls that remained standing had many holes through them. One of the buildings had more of the walls left than the other buildings and had a small section of colorful

bright blue paint left on the face of the store. She noticed the roof was still there and it looked like it might be a dry place to rest.

“Can we just stay in there for the night?” Solana yelled over the noise of the rain as she pointed to the blue store.

Everyone looked back at Solana and then at the dark empty store.

Ramiro shook his head no as he said, “We should keep going. Look for a better area.”

Solana looked around nervously and thought that maybe he was right. She hoped that the center of town would be safer looking. She wanted to get out of the rain, get warm, and dry again. She was so tired. She needed to lie down and get off her horse. Her hips were hurting. She tried to shift her position. She wondered if sitting sidesaddle would be more comfortable. Solana lifted her leg to try to pull it over the saddle. A sharp pain pierced into her buttocks making her grimace and give up on the idea of changing position. She wondered what this new pain was. Her mother told her pregnancy was hard but she had no idea there would be so many pains and in the weirdest places. She thought her mother meant that it was hard because of the extra weight she had to carry. She felt like she was about to fall apart at the slightest wrong move. She was so swollen, achy and hungry and to make matters worse, the cut on her thigh was throbbing. The wind began to blow pounding rain into her face. Solana shivered as the wind sent a chill through her body. She was so miserable that she began to cry quietly with her head down and her arms wrapped around herself.

After a long bout of crying, the sadness was gone but she still felt exhausted and achy. She didn't think she could hang on much longer. She looked around trying to find another shelter but the heavy rain made it difficult to see. All she saw were piles of rubble along the road. It was as if someone dropped bombs on the city. She wondered what had happened. The city seemed deserted. She looked forward and noticed they were about to pass a tall building. It had no roof, doors or windows left. There was some red graffiti on the side of the building that read, "Inkarri has returned!" She hoped the larger building and graffiti meant they were getting closer to the center of the city. They passed sections of the Incan stone walls that were still standing. She remembered learning about the them in school. The large blocks of stone were carved and fitted so perfectly that they needed no mortar. This made the walls very strong. She thought they might last forever and realized that they must be about eight hundred years old. As Solana was looking at the Incan walls, she saw a shadow move in the alley. It startled her to see movement. She looked at her family in front of her. Jose was leaning forward on the neck of his grey horse and appeared to be sleeping. Everyone else rode in a quiet stupor. Even the dogs trotted along sleepily. Solana looked around and didn't to see any more movement in the surrounding alleyways. The rain slowed and then stopped and she became aware of how loud the horse's hooves were as they walked down the cement street. The clunking seemed to echo off the mountains surrounding Cusco. If there was anyone left in the city, they would surely hear the noise.

“We are too loud. Let’s find a place to stop!” Solana said to her family.

They all turned around at once except Jose.

“She’s right,” Marcos said and then Solana noticed his eyes move from hers to something behind her.

Solana turned around and saw three raggedly dressed men walking down the center of the street not far behind them. The dogs spun around and growled loudly.

“Hey, do you know where we can stay the night?” Marcos shouted to them.

The men didn’t answer. They just walked straight for them with a strong purposeful walk. Their eyes fixed on them. The shorter man on the left side stared directly at Solana. Sunflower Magic whinnied, shook her head, and trotted away from the men. This inspired all the horses to trot. They quickly pulled away from the strangers. Jose woke up and he looked around confused.

“That was a strange group of men,” Ramiro said a bit nervously as he looked around.

Solana looked back and saw that the men still walked in their direction with a creepy determination. She shivered at the thought of them getting any closer. Everyone slowed their horses to a walk again, which Solana was grateful. It hurt her to be bounced much. She realized her teeth were clenched so hard her mouth hurt too. Solana tried to relax. They were just some weirdoes she reassured herself.

They approached a left turn in the road and as they rounded the corner, the road opened up into a triangular shaped area. In the middle of the area was a monument. The monument had two faces in a large cement block. It was covered with graffiti. Suddenly, several more men stepped out from behind the monument. Everyone pulled back on their horses' reins and stopped. The dogs barked and growled.

"We need a place to stay to rest a while and then we will be on our way. We have food to trade," Marcos said to the men.

More rough and dirty men and women came into the opening from the roads to the side and blocked their way. They were holding various weapons and didn't say anything as they walked in their direction.

"Don't get any closer or I'll shoot!" Ramiro shouted out.

Ramiro and Lukas held their weapons pointed at the gang. The gang stopped as Solana and her family rode back towards the turn in the road and away from the opening. Just as they reached the turn in the road, they saw the three men that had followed them. Two more men came out of alleys and ran at them. Solana's horse quickly turned and galloped away from the running men and straight into the gang in the center of town. All of the horses followed. Ramiro fired his shotgun back at the running men. Solana looked back to see one of them fall. The male dog jumped onto a man in front of them and knocked him back. The female dogs chased after another man that turned to run. Solana looked back at Ramiro and saw him

drop a bullet as he tried to reload. Another shot rang out, and blood squirted out of Ramiro's chest.

"Dad!" Jose cried.

A man grabbed Ramiro and pulled him off his horse. Solana looked away and hung on as Sunflower Magic kicked out at several men who attempted to grab her reins. Her horse kicked and ran into an open alley that led steeply upward. Solana glanced back and saw the gang had surrounded her family.

"Mama!" Solana screamed hoping they would follow her.

Sunflower Magic galloped up the narrow alley. There were large Incan stone walls on both sides of her. The street was made of stones with a stone stairway on one side of it for pedestrians. Solana heard more gunshots that sounded like a machine gun. Her heart sank at the sound. She pulled back on the reins to stop her horse. She had to go back and help her family. Sunflower Magic slowed and stopped. Solana turned around and saw a tall dirt-covered man step out from a doorway. He reached up and pulled Solana her off the horse. Sunflower Magic whinnied and bucked narrowly missing the man as she galloped up the alley. Solana struggled to break free as the man held her tightly around her chest in a bear hug.

"Look what I caught!" the tall man said.

Another man came out of the doorway. His black hair was sticking up in odd directions as if he just climbed out of bed. He grinned at Solana with rotten teeth, and looked at her up and down. Solana twisted and clawed at

the arms crushing her chest. She could barely breathe and felt sick to her stomach. The men smelled of whiskey and body odor so bad she thought they had not bathed in years. The man in front of her lifted up his torn t-shirt and began to unbuckle his belt. Solana kicked out at him and he caught her foot.

“We’re gonna have some fun with this feisty cat,” the man with the messy hair said.

Solana kicked and fought as the tall man her pulled her down to the stone street. Solana couldn’t believe what was happening to her. She looked around frantically for someone to help her. She had to find a way to get away from these terrible men.

“No!” Solana shouted and kicked the shin of the messy-haired man as he got closer to her and undid his pants. He laughed as he pushed her legs aside. Solana squirmed but the man held her legs down as he brought his face up to hers. He smelled her neck and licked her ear as Solana tried to pull away in disgust.

“So sweet. Don’t worry, your baby won’t mind,” the messy haired man whispered in her ear. Then he laughed a maniacal laugh that sent a chill through Solana and made her angry at the same time.

Solana turned and spit on his face. The man looked at her with an angry expression and lifted his hand to wipe off his face. Before he could clean his face his hand fell away, his face changed from angry to a look of

surprise. He fell back on the street staring up at the night sky, dead. Solana could hardly believe he was dead. She looked up the street and saw no one.

“Who’s there?” the tall man said nervously.

This time Solana heard the muffled sound of a gun firing with a silencer on it. The strong arms that held her relaxed and the man behind her fell back. She was sure there would be another quiet poof and she would be next. She tensed waiting for the bullet to hit. But none came. She scooted away from the pool of blood now flowing from the messy haired man’s head. She leaned her back against the stone wall and looked up and then down the alley. She couldn’t see anyone. She looked at the two dead men on the ground. The tall man who had been shot in the forehead. The bullet had come from up the alley. If she ran down the alley, she would run right back into the gang. She stayed still not knowing where to go. Fear had taken hold of her now and she was too scared to move.

“I won’t hurt you,” a quiet reassuring male voice said.

It was from up the alley. Solana thought it was some kind of trap. Yet, she couldn’t get her feet to move. She thought she should run. She looked at the doorway and wondered if she could escape through there.

The man said as he stepped out from the shadows of the alley, “I wouldn’t go in there. There will be more of them. Come with me, I can help you.”

He wore a black hoodie and dark jeans. There was a large knife in a sheath hanging from his belt and a handgun in his hand. As he slowly

stepped forward, he pulled the hood off his head so Solana could see his face. He had a handsome face with square cheekbones and dark eyes accented by bushy black eyebrows. His black hair was short and spiked. Solana thought he looked about the same age as her. He stretched his hand out towards Solana but he was too far away to reach her.

“It’s all right. I won’t hurt you,” he said.

“She went this way!” a rough voice shouted from down the alley.

Solana looked down the alley but didn’t see anyone. She could hear footsteps on the cobblestone road. She looked back at the man who stood waiting with his hand held out in invitation.

“Quickly! I can save you, if you come with me now,” he said.

Solana heard footsteps getting closer, that gave her the strength to overcome her fear, and she reached out towards the man. He firmly grabbed her hand and helped her stand. Then he pointed his handgun down the alley as he looked for the gang. Solana looked but still didn’t see anyone.

“Come on,” the man whispered to Solana as he pulled her up the alley keeping a tight grip on her hand. Solana’s hips hurt as she struggled to keep up with the man. The alley ended at a crossroad. Solana saw a shadowy outline of a jeep parked alongside the road. The man pulled Solana to the jeep. The jeep looked like it was about to fall apart with rust holes all over the body. She noticed there were no doors as he motioned for her to

climb in the passenger's side and he let go of her hand. He ran around to the driver's side and hopped into the jeep. Solana hesitated.

"Wait! I have to find my family," Solana said.

"There are too many of them. Let me take you to a safer place first. I will get help and come back to find your family."

Solana stood wondering if she could trust this man. She could just thank him and leave. Maybe she could find a place to hide until morning.

"I will keep you safe. I promise," the man said.

Solana thought he sounded sincere. She climbed into the jeep. He started the engine, put the jeep into first gear, and drove down the street. He left the headlights off so no one would see them leaving. It was hard for Solana to see where they were going. She wondered how he could see.

"Hold on!" he said.

He made a quick left turn that almost threw Solana out of the jeep before she grabbed onto her seat. After a few more quick turns, they were outside of the city and driving down a bumpy dirt road.

*** Section Break ***

"My name is Jayden," the man said as he smiled at Solana and then looked back at the road. He had finally turned on his headlights so Solana

saw that they were heading deep into the Peruvian forest following an old railroad track.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Solana feeling nervous.

“To my home, it’s not much further.”

The road crossed the railroad tracks and began following a river that flowed alongside a tall cliff. Jayden slowed down and drove around a flooded part of the road. The jeep sank deep in the mud on the side of the road but Jayden managed to keep the jeep moving forward and back onto the road. The jostling of the ride was hurting Solana and she groaned in pain as she held onto the jeep.

Jayden said, “Sorry. There isn’t much I can do about these roads. The Urubamba River is really high for this time of year. So, what is your name?”

“Solana.”

“Solana. That’s a pretty name, it suits you,” Jayden said and glanced at her and down at her belly. “Do you mind if I ask when your baby is due?”

Solana looked at Jayden wondering why he cared. He seemed nice to her but could she trust him?

“You don’t have to answer. I was just curious. I haven’t seen a pregnant woman since, I was a little boy,” Jayden told her.

“It’s OK. My baby is due in August,” Solana said.

Jayden gave her a funny look, “Holy shit, that’s not long Solana. What was your family doing taking you into Cusco of all places?”

“We’re just travelling through and I’m not some frail girl!”

“I see that. But, you are so pregnant and beautiful. Many people would want to hurt you or cut you open and steal your baby. Don’t you know that most women are having a hard time getting pregnant?” Jayden said.

Solana looked at him surprised and put one hand on her belly, “No, I have only been around my family and no one in my family is trying to get pregnant. It would be crazy to get pregnant with the world in such disarray.”

“Then why did you get pregnant?” Jayden asked.

“I didn’t plan on it. I was in love, OK?” Solana said wondering why she cared to explain anything at all to him.

“And your boyfriend thought it would be all right to take you travelling across the country?”

“He’s dead! Saprosia killed him before I could even tell him I was pregnant.”

Jayden didn’t say anything as he drove quietly. Solana looked away from him and tried to stop the lump in her throat from forming tears. She took a deep breath and looked out at the river. The river churned wildly with white water splashing up over large rocks.

“I’m sorry,” Jayden said calmly.

They drove over a bridge, crossed the river and then ascended a steep mountain, switching back and forth, as they followed the road. When they reached the top, Jayden pulled his jeep into a lot in front of a one-story lodge. He turned off the engine and turned to Solana.

“Look, I’m sorry if I made you mad. I just… want to help you. You seem so nice and I haven’t met very many nice people lately,” Jayden said and paused turning to look at the lodge. “This is where I live. Well, almost. The king lives in the lodge. I live behind it in Machu Picchu. You are welcome to stay at my house,” he said and Solana looked at him suspiciously making him laugh. “Don’t worry I won’t touch you.”

“You have a king? And isn’t Machu Picchu that lost Incan city?” Solana asked.

“Yes to both. The king, Santos, is strict but he helps keep order in our city. Otherwise, it would be lawless like Cusco. Most of us are from Cusco. Santos offered us a safer place to live. Only, I’d stay away from Santos’ wife, Reia. She is a real bitch!” Jayden said.

Solana laughed, “Thanks, I will have to remember that.”

“Come on, I have to introduce you to Santos before I can bring you into the city. Don’t worry it’s no big deal. Then I can take you to my place and you can lie down and rest while I go back to find your family.”

“Jayden, can you look for my horse too?” Solana asked. “She ran off when one of the men grabbed me. She’s a Tobiano Pinto.”

“Sure. I saw your horse run out of the alley. That’s how I found you,” said Jayden as he got out of the car and dashed to Solana’s side to help her out of the jeep. Solana took his hand to keep steady. She was so weak from exhaustion and hunger she felt faint. Jayden noticed this and picked her up into his arms.

“I can walk!” Solana lied but didn’t try to fight.

Jayden continued to carry her, “It’s no trouble.”

He walked up the wide stone stairway leading to the front door of the lodge. Blinds covered the large windows on both sides of the doorway. The blinds were glowing from the lights within and she could hear music. At least they had electricity she thought. She looked up and saw “Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge” written in faded letters above the doorway. Jayden reached out with one hand and opened the door. They walked into an empty room that probably served as the lobby.

“Put me down, I’m fine now,” Solana said.

Jayden set Solana down gently and said, “Each night people from the city entertain the king. Whomever he likes best will get to have dinner with him. Follow me.”

The drums were beating loudly as Solana followed Jayden through a doorway leading off the lobby to the left. They walked into a large room with polished oak floor and ceiling. Jayden grabbed Solana’s hand and pulled her along as he pushed his way through the crowd. Everyone was tapping their feet and bouncing to the quick beat of the drums. Solana could hear a male voice singing a song she didn’t know. She tried to peer through the crowd as Jayden pulled her. She saw three women dancers who wore fringed bikinis. The fringes flowed with their quick hip shakes and were mesmerizing. Solana stumbled on someone’s foot and had to look forward to catch herself. She felt Jayden’s grip tighten as he glanced back to check on

her. He saw she was fine and smiled at her and continued. He stopped when he reached the far wall in the long rectangular-shaped room. There was a stone fireplace at this end of the room. The fireplace was dark and blackened from past fires. Jayden lead Solana away from the fireplace along the wall to the front of the crowd.

“Find a place to sit with them. I have to tell the king about you,” Jayden said as he gestured to a row of young women who sat on pillows on the floor up against the wall.

A girl with a round face and long, straight dark brown hair with no bangs looked up at Solana. She looked warm and friendly as she flashed a smile at Solana. Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she patted the pillow next to her. Solana liked this girl right away so she smiled back and sat down next to her. Now Solana saw the dancing women much better as no one blocked her view. There was a band with one vocalist. The large bass drums and bongos were loud and stood out above the other instruments. The band also played maracas and a Brazilian friction drum called a cuíca. Solana saw other instruments but didn’t recognize them. Each of the dancing women had three large fluffy feathers attached to the front of their headbands. The women’s bellies undulated to the rhythm of the drums as they bounce stepped forward and back performing a samba dance.

“My name is Shekinah, what’s yours?” the friendly girl next to her asked.

“I’m Solana.”

“Nice to meet you,” Shekinah said while she watched the dance.

“Thanks,” Solana answered and regarded her for a moment wondering how old she was. Then she decided to ask, “How old are you?”

“Seventeen. How about you?”

“Twenty,” Solana said and looked back at the dancers.

“Oh, you’re the same age as Jayden.”

The dancers moved towards King Santos but stopped at the end of the wooden floor, smiled, twirled around and pranced back towards the crowd. King Santos sat in a large chair that was on a slightly raised wooden platform. The lodge front windows were behind him and there were glass windows above him creating a solarium. The solarium had a grey stone floor setting it apart from the rest of the room. Solana thought King Santos was an older man probably in his forties. He might be good looking if his nose wasn’t so large. A colorfully weaved long cape was draped over his dark blue shirt and pants. A round hat with a golden sun in the front was covering most of his short black hair. Golden disks representing the sun dangled from the hat on each side of his head as if he wore earrings. Solana wondered what kind of man he was and how he was chosen to be king. She saw lean chest muscles under his shirt but he wasn’t very big. Then she saw Jayden approaching from the side. Before Jayden stepped on the stone floor, a large muscular bald man stepped forward and blocked his way. Jayden stood tall with his chest out and said something to the man that Solana couldn’t hear. Jayden pointed at her and the large bald man looked at her

for a moment. Then he stood aside and let Jayden walk by. Jayden walked up to the chair and kneeled with his head down. King Santos motioned him to come forward. He walked up and talked near the king's ear. Solana saw a woman get up from a chair behind the king and she stood behind him to listen to Jayden. Solana thought the women looked Asian with her silky straight black hair and small nose. She had a side part with long bangs covering half her face. Her hair was cut very short in the back but her bangs and front sides of her hair reached just below her chin. She was wearing a red shirt that looked like a scarf crossed over her breasts and tied behind her head. She put her hand on Jayden's shoulder as she listened. Her long golden fingernails were filed to sharp points.

"That's Queen Reia," Shekinah told Solana.

"Is she Chinese?" Solana asked.

"She is Peruvian-Chinese. I'd stay away from her if I were you."

"I know, Jayden told me she was mean,"

"It's not only that. She really wants to have a baby and she has tried everything to get pregnant. She even had a witch doctor try to help her. The few pregnancies that took all ended in miscarriages," Shekinah said.

Solana put her hands on her belly wishing she could hide her baby and looked at Reia. Queen Reia looked up at Solana. She whispered something in King Santos' ear while staring at Solana with her black eyes. The King nodded and raised one hand and stood up. Instantly, the music and dancing stopped.

“We have a special guest,” King Santos announced and then turned to Jayden. “Bring her before me.”

King Santos sat back down as Jayden bowed and made a beeline towards Solana. One of the dancers with long brown wavy hair sneered at Jayden as he brushed by. He ignored her and the other dancers as he walked by. Solana stood up as Jayden reached out and took her hand. She suddenly realized how terrible she must look. She looked down at her muddy, torn clothes. Blood was showing through the bandages on her leg and her capri’s were shredded. However, Solana was so determined to get help for her family that she didn’t really care. Jayden led her to the clearing where the dancers stood in front of the king. Jayden and Solana turned to face King Santos and Jayden bowed his head. Solana bowed as well thinking it was best to follow Jayden’s lead. She didn’t want any trouble. It was silly to pretend there was any real royalty. She thought the time of kings and queens were from an age long past.

“What is your name?” King Santos asked.

Solana thought he must already know but probably wanted her to restate it for the benefit of everyone.

“Solana Gonzalez,”

“Where are you from?” King Santos asked.

“I’m from the Buenos Aires Province in Argentina,” Solana said.

“Oh really, I thought everyone in that area died when it flooded,” Queen Reia stated as she stepped forward and stood next to King Santos.

She was wearing golden armbands and many bracelets on both arms. Her red skirt was very low showing off a long red dragon tattooed across her flat stomach. The dragon curved up over her hipbones and dipped down low under her belly button. Solana felt angry when Reia talked about her homeland as if she knew something.

“Not everyone!” Solana snapped back at Queen Reia.

Surprised and shocked sounds came from the crowd behind her and Solana immediately regretted not holding her tongue. The king raised his hands to quiet everyone.

“Solana, join me for dinner tonight so I may hear your story of how you came to be here. And Jayden, you may take some of my men to go look for Solana’s family.” King Santos stood up and walked towards the door then stopped and looked at the three dancers and said, “Isabella, Martina and Ana, see that Solana gets cleaned up and give her something to wear for dinner. Come Reia, we have business to attend to.”

The three dancers bowed as they watched the king and queen leave the room.

“Come on,” one of the dancers said and roughly grabbed Solana’s arm and pulled her towards the door.

“Take it easy Isabella,” Jayden said to the dancer pulling Solana.

Isabella frowned at Jayden as she said, "She cost us dinner with the king and now we have to take care of her. You know we practiced that dance for weeks Jayden!”

“It’s not her fault. I’m just asking you to be nice for once,” Jayden said.

“Fine, but you owe me,” Isabella snapped.

“I’ll do my best to find your family and horse,” Jayden said to Solana and dashed out of the room.

Isabella had dark hair that was heavily highlighted with deep red streaks. She had dark eye makeup that made her eyes look cat-like. She had a silver metal ring pierced through the center of her lower lip. As she pulled Solana out of the room and down the hall, Solana noticed she had a skull tattoo on the back of her shoulder.

A dancer with long wavy brown hair walked up beside them and said, “She’s so fat! None of my clothes will fit her, Ana do you have anything?”

Ana replied, “I know what you mean Martina, she is huge! I don’t have anything either.”

Solana looked back at Ana who was following them. She had straight light blonde hair and pale blue eyes.

“I’m pregnant, Ana!”

“I know that Solana. I’m not stupid,” Ana replied.

Isabella opened a door and they all went into a guest room. There was a double bed and a small bathroom.

“Get a bath. You smell awful,” Isabella said. “And give me your shoes and I’ll have them cleaned.”

Solana handed her muddy moon shoes to Isabella. She thought she would never see them again but was too tired to care. Solana closed the bathroom door and sat down on the toilet to rest a moment. She was lightheaded from hunger and exhaustion. The last thing she wanted was to eat dinner with some strange man who pretended to be a king. She looked at the bathtub and thought it feel good to get a bath. She started the water and was amazed they even had warm water. She undressed and carefully peeled off the bandages on her leg. She was relieved to see that her cut didn't look too bad. She climbed into the warm water and sat back to soak and relax.

After finishing her bath, she wrapped up in a towel and opened the bathroom door.

"About time!" Martina said as she sat on the bed and brushed her wavy brown hair. "Isabella and Ana went to find you something to wear. Sit down and let me style your hair."

Solana sat down on the bed and Martina brushed out the knots. After she was satisfied that all the knots were gone she braided Solana's hair into a French braid. Just as Martina finished, Ana and Isabella came into the room. Ana was carrying a light yellow dress and sandals.

"I hope you appreciate this. It wasn't easy finding you something to wear," Ana said handing Solana the dress.

"And here is a pair of underwear," Isabella said tossing the beige underwear at Solana.

Solana quickly put on the underwear and then noticed her cut was bleeding slightly.

“Do you have any bandages?” Solana asked.

“Yes,” Isabella said and opened a dresser drawer and pulled out several bandages.

After Isabella bandaged her leg, Martina helped Solana pull the dress on over her head. The dress was soft chiffon silk and felt good on Solana’s skin. It had a V-neck and halter style top. The dress reached half way down her calf in front and down to nearly the floor in the back. The back of the dress scooped low leaving her upper back naked. The sandals were simple with no heel and felt comfortable enough.

“What happened to my moon shoes?” Solana asked Isabella.

“They were such a mess. Besides, you weren’t seriously going to wear those with a dress were you?” said Isabella. “Let’s go. We need to get you to the dinner now.”

The three women led Solana back to the same room they were in earlier. There was a long table in the center of the wooden floor. It was set for four people. One setting was at each end and two on each side.

“Go sit down,” Isabella gestured to one of the seats on the side of the table. Then she turned and left with her friends.

Solana walked in and sat down. There was a plain brown place mat with no plate in front of her. It was a large table for only four people. She looked around the room. The room looked much larger now that most of the

people were gone. She had a sudden urge to get up and run out of there. She wanted to run right out of the lodge and never come back. However, she needed to eat so badly and she could smell the aroma of grilled meat. Saliva flowed into her mouth, so she decided to stay for dinner. She could always leave in the morning.

King Santos walked in with the queen walking besides him. A smaller man with a short mohawk and the large bald man followed them. The bald man stopped at the doorway, crossed his arms and stood guard. The king and queen sat down at the table one at each end. The man with the Mohawk sat down at the side across from Solana and nodded at her as he sat down.

“Let the dinner begin!” King Santos said in a loud voice.

Several men and women entered at once carrying plates and pitchers of a pale golden liquid. They set down the plates and silverware. First, they served the king and queen and then the man with the mohawk and finally Solana. One of them poured the drink into each of the glasses. Solana looked at her plate of boiled yellow potatoes in a creamy, spicy, yellow sauce. The potatoes were served over lettuce and garnished with black olives, white corn kernels and hard-boiled egg quarters.

“Thank you Solana for joining us for dinner. This is Mohawk, my most trusted advisor,” King Santos said as he gestured towards the man across from her.

Mohawk was wearing all black except for a short colorfully weaved cape around his back. He was a scrawny man with an evil look in his dark

eyes. Most of his dark colored hair was shaven to a short stubble except the strip of hair that formed a short mohawk.

“Nice to meet you Solana,” Mohawk said as he forced a fake smile at her.

“Thanks, you too,” Solana replied.

“Let us eat now,” King Santos said.

She looked at the king and saw that he was eating so Solana picked up her fork and ate. Solana knew the potatoes were the cold dish that was served as the first course of the meal. She ate slowly and chewed carefully to be sure she would have room for the rest of the meal. After several bites, she picked up her drink and smelled it. It was chica, a beer made from corn. She sat it back down not wanting to drink alcohol. King Santos noticed this and frowned.

“How inconsiderate of us. Of course, you don’t want to hurt your unborn child,” King Santos said and then shouted, “Bring Solana some chica molada!”

After a few moments, a woman came out carrying an empty glass and a pitcher of a dark purple liquid. She set the glass in front of Solana and filled it. Solana’s parents used to give her the unfermented chica molada on special occasions. It was made from a dark purple corn. She picked up the glass and took a long drink of the sweet fruity liquid.

“Thank you,” Solana said to King Santos and smiled.

“Are you really from Buenos de Aires Province?” King Santos asked.

“Yes, my family runs a sunflower farm there. At least we used to until it flooded,” Solana replied.

Queen Reia asked Solana, “How did you escape the tsunami and flood?”

“We were out horseback riding in the mountains when it happened. I saw the wave when it came crushing through the valley. It nearly killed me and my family,” Solana said.

King Santos replied, “It is very fortunate that you and your family escaped. Have you been traveling ever since?”

“No, we lived at my uncle’s house in the Famatina Mountains for a while. Only, the hydrogen sulfide gasses were getting worse and forced us to move to higher ground,” Solana said.

King Santos said, “You no longer need to live as a vagabond. Consider this your new permanent home.”

“Thank you but I plan on leaving first thing in the morning,” Solana said.

Queen Reia replied, “From what I understand, you and your family were nearly killed in Cusco. Surely, you don’t plan on risking the life of your baby again?”

Solana felt a surge of anger. As if Queen Reia knows what is best for her baby. She did her best to quell the feeling of anger. Instead, she concentrated on eating and then took a drink so she could calm herself down before answering.

“Of course not. I do appreciate your hospitality but I’m on my way to United States and I must get there right away,” Solana said and immediately regretted telling them too much.

Queen Reia asked, “United States? Why are you going there?”

“My aunt lives there,” Solana lied a little too quickly.

Several men and women came in, took away their plates and refilled their glasses. Then others came in carrying more plates of food. They set a plate in front of Solana with two thick slices of alpaca steak and some asparagus on the side. Solana picked up her knife and fork and carved pieces of steak. King Santos and Queen Reia were also carving into their steaks. Solana was full already but she wanted to eat as much of it as she could stuff in. She wasn’t sure when her next meal would be.

“When is your baby due?” Queen Reia asked.

Solana finished chewing a piece of steak, swallowed and answered, “In August.”

“What date dear?”

Solana didn’t want to tell her. She thought about making up a different date but then decided it didn’t matter if she knew.

“I’m due August 24th,” Solana answered.

Queen Reia replied, “And you want to leave this beautiful city with your baby due so soon?”

“Sorry, I really must be leaving,” Solana said.

“Stop!” the large bald man said.

Everyone looked toward the door and saw the large bald man blocking Jayden.

King Santos asked, “Were you successful in locating Solana’s family?”

Jayden looked at Solana and shook his head sadly, “I’m sorry Solana. I couldn’t find any of them.”

Mohawk added, “Most likely they’re all dead. Even our toughest men have trouble surviving in Cusco.”

King Santos replied, “Thank you Jayden. You may go now.”

Jayden hesitated a moment, looked at Solana then turned and left.

“I’m afraid with your family gone, I must insist that you stay with us,” King Santos replied. “When your baby is born Reia and I will raise and protect your child as our own.”

“No!” Solana said horrified.

The large bald guard suddenly stormed at Solana and Solana instinctively leaned back with her eyes wide with fear. He lifted his hand about to backhand Solana and then stopped with his arm frozen midair. Solana turned and saw that King Santos held his hand up.

“That won’t be necessary. Solana is a smart girl. Certainly she understands the need to keep order in my city,” King Santos said. “Solana you will stay in the lodge until your baby is born. I offer you my best care and food during your pregnancy and we will raise your child as royalty. You are alone, young and foolish. What do you have to offer your child? You

can’t even defend yourself. We can offer your baby a much better life than you can. Don’t you agree Solana?”

“No, no,” Solana said softly with tears running down her cheeks.

Queen Reia said with a smile, “Don’t worry child, your baby will be safe with us.”

Solana looked down at her lap and wondered if they were right about her baby. She couldn’t believe her family was dead and gone. She felt so alone. She was no longer hungry and felt sick to her stomach so she pushed her plate back.

King Santos said, “I believe Solana is finished. Please escort her to her room. And Solana, don’t try anything foolish like running away. We will hunt you down and bring you back. Once you are a citizen of my city, you will always be a citizen. No one ever leaves.”

Solana didn’t look up at the King. She wished she had never met any of them. A woman walked up to Solana and gently placed her hand on Solana’s shoulder. Solana stood up slowly and kept her head hung low. Tears rolled down Solana’s cheeks as she let the woman lead her out of the room.

Chapter 9

Saturday, July 30th

Dear Diary,

I feel so lonely. I wish I had a friend to play with or a real family that cared about me. Instead, I only have my annoying little brother. This morning, he stole my journal and colored in it! He ruined three pages of my journal. How could he? He knows this book is special to me and this is probably the only journal left in the whole world. I'm going to ignore him for the rest of the day. Of course, when I told Peter and Vicki, they took his side. They said his pictures are nice and I should add more pictures. His picture of the windmill does look good but I'm mad that he took it without asking me. I just want to get to Colorado already. It seems like we have been traveling forever. I hope I can find a friend when we get there.

Peggy stopped writing and looked out the window trying to imagine what her new friend might look like. She thought they would be best friends and explore their new home together. Maybe she would have a horse and they could ride it across green fields with fresh air blowing through her hair. Peggy wished she could draw a picture of a horse but she wasn't very good at drawing pictures. She stared out at the dead forest of pine trees that they passed by and wondered if their new home would have living green trees. Peggy imagined climbing up an apple tree and plucking an

apple straight from the tree and eating it as she laughed at the jokes her friend was telling. It was going to be a wonderful new home she just knew it.

Peggy noticed snow was falling outside. Could it really be snowing she wondered.

“It’s snowing!” Phil announced happily, as he got up and ran to the front of the RV.

Peggy got up and followed him. Yet she thought it can’t be snow, it is too hot outside. They looked out the front window of the RV and saw the snow falling in big flakes.

“Look, it’s snowing!” Phil said again as he pointed at the snow.

Vicki lifted her head and opened her eyes, “I’m trying to sleep.”

“I don’t think it’s snow,” Peter said as he slowed the RV to a stop in the middle of the road.

“What is it?” Peggy asked.

Peter leaned forward to get a better look at the flakes landing on the windshield and replied, “It’s ashes!”

Peter sat back and said, “Oh, no!”

“What?” Vicki asked.

“Look ahead, see those clouds?” Peter said pointing at the clouds in front of them.

Ahead of them, the road dipped low and curved to the left going around a hill full of dead pine trees. Beyond the hill, large clouds formed

high above the hilltop and extended across most of their view in front of them. The top of the clouds were white and billowy like a thunderstorm cloud. The lower portion of the cloud was a foggy grey extending all the way to the ground so that they couldn't see the bottom of the cloud.

"Please don't tell me it's another storm!" Vicki said.

"No, worse. It's a fire!" Peter said, "I thought we were driving into another storm. I didn't say anything because I didn't want to scare anyone."

"Can we drive by real fast?" Phil asked.

After a moment of thought Peter replied, "I'm not sure if we can get through. Let's get a little closer and try to see how bad it is."

Peter drove forward but slower than before. Everyone was quiet as they watched the ashes falling from the sky. More and more ashes fell covering the windshield and forced Peter to turn on the windshield wipers. As they drove around the hill, the falling ashes stopped and they saw the massive forest fire that devoured the dead pinewood forest. Flames reached high above the treetops.

Peter drove closer as he said, "It looks like the road is still open."

As they got closer, the wind shifted directions and a wall of fire blew across the road several hundred feet ahead of them. Peter stopped the RV. They watched mesmerized as the fire swirled and danced in the wind.

"I think the flames are getting closer," Peggy said.

Peter replied, "You're right. We better get out of here."

The road was too narrow to turn the RV around easily. Peter moved the RV forward and backwards as he attempted to turn it around. The wind shifted again and the fire seemed to leap directly at them. The RV was not even half way turned around yet. Peter began to spin the steering wheel frantically. The RV moved forward and stopped at the edge of the road. Peter put the RV in reverse and spun the steering wheel back again.

“Hurry!” Peggy shouted.

Peggy watched the fire move closer and closer. She didn’t think there was enough time to turn the RV around. She thought she could feel the heat of the fire. Suddenly, Peggy felt the RV speed up. She hung on as Peter took one last turn, straightened the RV and headed down the road away from the fire. Peggy and Phil went to the back of the RV and looked out the back window. They saw the fire shift direction to the west and blow across the road again. They watched until they drove around the hill, which blocked their view of the fire.

After hours of back tracking, they finally came to another road. Peter stopped at the road and checked the map. Then he put the map down and turned onto the road heading west.

“With any luck, this road will get us around the fire,” Peter said.

Peggy settled into the chair and prepared for another boring day. The road soon turned southward again and Peggy thought the fire must be long gone. Peter must have thought the same thing because soon they turned

onto a new road heading east again. They traveled eastward for a short distance. Then Peggy felt the RV slow down to stop.

“There’s more smoke ahead,” Peter told Vicki. “There are either a lot of fires or this is the largest fire I have ever heard of.”

Vicki didn’t say anything as Peter turned the RV around and headed west again. Soon they were back on the southbound road. Peggy glanced out the window and noticed a sign that told them they were on Caribou Highway 97.

“Can I see the map?” Vicki asked Peter.

Peter handed the map over to Vicki and said, “These fires are forcing us way out of our way. I was planning to head toward Edmonton but all the roads were blocked by the fire. I’m worried because even the roads to Calgary were blocked but I’m still hoping we can turn east at Kamloops.”

Vicki asked, “How about we keep heading south towards Hope and then head east?”

“Well, I guess we could,” Peter said as he tried to glance at the map. He looked back at the road and steered the RV back to the center of the lane. “Can you see if there is a high elevation place nearby for us to stop and rest for the night?”

“Sure. I’m so sick of travelling. And this turning around and go back is killing me.” Vicki whined.

She pulled the map closer to her face and studied it quietly for a few moments. Then she started reading ads along the map edges. Peter glanced to see what she was doing and gave Vicki a confused look.

Vicki smiled and said, “Oh yes, I found the perfect place. There is a mountain resort called E.C. Manning Park. According to this ad, they have a spa with Jacuzzis. Doesn’t that sound nice? And it is high enough in elevation. I bet there will be people living there. Oh, how I could use a good meal and a soak in a hot tub. And they even have little cabins. I bet the kids would enjoy their own cabin and we could finally get some time alone. Just like old times.”

Peter glanced at Vicki and smiled at her, “That sounds great. E.C. Manning Park it is.”

Vicki replied, “I really need this break you know. I’m sorry I’ve been so cranky lately.”

“That’s OK honey. It’s understandable considering what we’ve been going through,” Peter said and paused. “Did you say we would pass the city of Hope? If so, would you mind if we make a quick stop to look for more supplies? Maybe I can find you some new clothes.”

“That would be nice,” Vicki said smiling and looked at the map again. “Yes, we will pass really close to Hope. I think a quick stop would be worth it. But honestly, my whole body has never ached this bad,” Vicki said as she moaned and stretched. The black and white spotted rabbit ran past Peggy and playfully hopped into Vicki’s lap. Vicki grabbed the rabbit by the nap of

its neck and handed it to Peggy. “I suggest you get your rabbits away from me before I cook one of them for dinner.” Vicki said with an evil smile.

“No!” Peggy said as she took the rabbit and cuddled it, “You wouldn’t.”

“Not unless we have to Peggy. You know, we really only need four of them and we could use the protein,” Peter said.

Peggy turned and walked away. She gathered all the rabbits and put them back in their cage. Then she carried the cage to the back of the RV. She wanted to hide them. She thought if they were out of sight, they might forget about eating them. She slid the cage under the bunk bed and then took a blanket and covered them. She took a deep breath and let out a sigh. They still had plenty of food so there was no reason to eat the rabbits. She closed the curtain to the back room for good measure. Then she laid down on the sofa, closed her eyes and fell asleep.

*** Section Break ***

Later, the RV slowly came to a stop and idled. Peggy opened her eyes and looked up at Peter and Vicki. They stared out the front windshield not saying a word. Peggy was curious so she got up to see what they were looking at. They were stopped in the middle of the highway. Peggy looked

out and saw a large bay of water surrounded by mountains. The highway went right into the water as if the RV could suddenly convert into a boat and continue out into the sea. There was a green highway sign on the side of the road in front of them with an arrow indicating the exit for the city of Hope. The bay was misty and dark except for beams of sunlight shining down. The sun was slowly slipped down past the top of the western mountains. Peggy watched as the waves gently rolled onto the road and that was when she realized just how strange this scene was.

“The water is purple!” Peggy exclaimed and pointed at the waves.

This startled Peter out of the trance to reply, “You’re right, it is purple. I’m not sure why. Maybe some kind of chemical spilled into the water?”

“Cool,” Phil said as he pushed forward to get a better look.

“Hey! Quit pushing,” Peggy said and pushed back.

“Stop pushing!” Vicki demanded.

“Let your brother take a look Peggy,” Peter said as Peggy moved to make room for Phil to squeeze in. “Since we’re obviously not going to get supplies from Hope, let’s head for the park resort.”

“Thank God!” Vicki said as Peter turned the RV around and headed east up into the mountains.

They pulled into the parking lot of the E.C. Manning resort lodge. The lodge was a large one-story building with four carved wooden posts in the

front. Peggy squinted and tried to see what was carved into the posts. She thought the carvings looked like animals.

“Vicki, can you stay here with the kids? I want to check it out,” Peter said.

Peggy whined, “Awww, I want to go!”

Vicki replied to Peter, “No, I’m not staying in this RV for another second! I need to stretch my legs. The kids will be fine by themselves for a few minutes. Besides, you are not the best at dealing with strangers Peter. I better go along to make sure we are treated fairly.”

“If you insist dear,” Peter replied to Vicki.

“I want to go too!” Phil said.

“Yeah, can’t we go?” Peggy asked.

“No, we’re not sure what kind of people we’re dealing with. If we need to get out in a hurry, I want you two here and ready to go. We’ll be right back,” Peter said as he opened the door and took a deep breath. “The air is fairly fresh smelling here with only a hint of sulfur.”

Vicki quickly got out and closed the door of the RV. Peggy and Phil climbed up into the front seats to watch them walk towards the lodge.

“I don’t see anyone,” Phil said looking around. “Are there really people living here?”

Peggy looked around and thought it looked deserted. She saw one parked car with the driver’s door left hanging open. The front seat was torn with stuffing coming out of it.

“Look!” Phil said and pointed towards a parked pickup truck in the direction away from the lodge.

Peggy looked and was startled when she saw skeleton sitting in the front seat.

“I want to get out of here!” Phil said suddenly moved to sit right next to Peggy and held onto her.

“It’s OK Phil; it’s only a dead person. It can’t hurt us,” Peggy tried to comfort Phil. Yet, Peggy was scared and held onto Phil just as tightly as he held onto her. Despite all the people that must have died, this was the first actual skeleton she saw. Peggy wondered if there were more skeletons and looked around. She didn’t really want to find any more but she couldn’t help but look for them. Then she saw it, another set of bones lying underneath the pickup truck. Peggy thought that was a strange place to die. She didn’t want Phil to see the bones so she said, “I bet Peter and Vicki will be coming back soon. How about we light the lantern so it won’t be so dark?”

Peggy headed to the kitchen of the RV with Phil close behind her. She opened the cabinet with the oil lantern, got it out and set it on the table. She grabbed the matches and lit the lantern like Peter had showed her. Peggy sat down at the table feeling a little better with the warm glow of the lamp. Phil sat down across from her and looked less scared as well. They looked out the window to watch for Peter and Vicki.

There was a black outline of rounded mountains directly behind the lodge. Peggy wondered if there were any animals still living out there. Just then, two figures came out of the lodge and walked towards them.

“It’s them. They’re coming back,” Phil said, “I wish they would hurry!”

Peggy watched as they seemed to walk agonizingly slow. Suddenly, Peggy had a terrible thought, what if it wasn’t them.

“Let’s duck down and hide,” Peggy said as she lowered her head but kept it high enough to see out the window and watch the two figures walk towards them.

“Why?” Phil asked as he ducked down.

“What if it’s not them?”

Phil’s eyes grew in size and he looked back out the window. Then he said, “Turn off the lantern.”

“No, if we turn it off now they will know someone is in here,” Peggy said.

Peggy’s heart pounded in her chest. What would they do if it weren’t Peter and Vicki? Should they leave the RV and try to hide? She remembered the pickup truck with the skeletons. The closest place to hide was the truck. Peggy definitely didn’t want to go anywhere near there. She looked back out the window as the shadowy figures approached the RV. They were getting closer.

“It’s them! It’s Peter and Vicki!” Phil said sitting up.

Peggy jumped from the sudden loudness of Phil's exclamation. Embarrassed she tried to hide this and quickly sat back up.

"It's about time. Do you think they could be any slower?" Peggy said irritated. They shouldn't have left them all alone. Next time she was going with them no matter what they said. "What is that annoying buzzing sound?" Peggy said as she realized she had been hearing it for a while.

"I don't know," Phil said, "I thought it was in my ears. You can hear it too?"

"Yeah, it's weird and it's getting louder." Peggy said. "Hey, did you see that?"

"See what?" Phil asked looking scared.

"Something just flew past the window."

Peggy and Phil peered out the window. Vicki and Peter were looking around. Suddenly, they swatted at the air around them.

"There is some kind of bug out there." Peggy said as she watched Vicki waved her arms in the air like crazy and moved further away from the RV. Peter covered his head and ducked as he tried to get to the RV.

"We have to help them!" Phil said and ran for the door.

Peggy ran after Phil. Phil got to the side door and opened it. Peggy saw large winged insects zip past the RV. They were long insects with a tail that curled upwards. The buzzing noise was very loud.

"Over here!" Phil shouted.

Phil began to step out of the RV but Peggy grabbed his shirt to stop him just as a large swarm of insects swirled by the RV door. The swarm turned and headed directly for Peter and Vicki. Vicki screamed loudly and ran back towards the lodge. Peter was crouched down with his hands over his head as he blindly headed for the RV. Peggy saw insects all over him.

“Peter!” Peggy screamed as she watched in horror as Peter stumbled and fell to the ground.

“No!” Phil shouted.

The swarm reached Peter and instantly covered his body. The insects caught up to Vicki as well and covered her body. The writhing mass of insects that was once Vicki fell to the ground and slid a short way before coming to a stop. The screaming stopped. Peggy held tightly to Phil who struggled to break free of her grip.

“We have to help them!” Phil shouted.

“It’s too late,” Peggy said.

An insect flew right at Peggy and she ducked. It flew over her head and into the RV. Another one came at them and Phil slammed the door of the RV. The insect in the RV turned and came at them. Peggy instinctively swatted the insect away and down. It was knocked to the floor of the RV. Then Phil ran up and stomped on it. He stomped and stomped as he cried. Peggy put her arm on his shoulder.

“You got it, it’s dead.”

Phil turned and collapsed and cried in Peggy's arms. She held him and patted his back as she noticed the windows were covered with the insects. "Shhh, Phil. We need to be quiet so they will go away."

Phil looked up and saw the insects. He stopped crying, wiped his eyes but couldn't stop the occasional sniffle. An insect flew by them on the inside of the RV headed for the back of the RV. Then another one.

"They're… they're getting in," Phil stuttered out in fear.

One, two…no three insects buzzed around the RV as Peggy and Phil quietly shrank to the floor. Another insect flew by making it four Peggy thought. How long before the entire RV was filled, she wondered. She tried to look out the window to see if they could run but the windows were covered. They were going to die just like Peter and Vicki. Peggy was too scared to move. She watched yet another insect fly by coming from the front of the RV. She wondered how they were getting in. She was losing count as she watched them hover slowly around. She thought they knew they were trapped. The insects were going to toy with them and take their time eating them. One of the insects flew right up to them and hovered. She saw into its large creepy insect eyes. She thought it looked like a flying grasshopper with a scorpion tail. It flexed its stinging tail and flew closer.

"No!!!" Phil shouted and jumped up off the floor. He knocked the insect to the ground as he barged past as if he didn't even notice it. He quickly batted down a few more insects and jumped up on the cupboard. He knocked away the insects that crawled on the cupboard door and opened

the door. The chickadee immediately flew out of the cupboard. It flew straight for the lantern and landed on the table next to it. Phil followed it and sat down at the table. Peggy got off the floor, ran over to the table, and sat close by Phil. They noticed the insects stayed further away from them now that they were close to the lantern. Then she remembered the rabbits.

“We have to save the rabbits.” Peggy said.

Phil replied with a simple nod and “Uh huh,” as he placed his hand by the chickadee so it would hop onto his hand. Then he placed the chickadee onto his shoulder.

Peggy grabbed the handle of the lantern and picked it up off the table. Peggy held it out in the front of her and Phil grabbed her arm so they walked together with their arms locked. As they walked, the insects moved away as if the light of the lamp was a protective shield. They got to the back of the RV and opened the curtain. The breeze from the curtain made the flame flicker. Peggy stopped moving and held her breath as she watched the flame dim and nearly burn out. The insects flew in closer. Then the flame brightened and regained its original strength and the insects moved back. After a moment, Peggy continued to move slowly towards the bunk beds. There were several insects crawling on the blankets that covered the rabbit cage. As they approached with the lantern, the insects flew away. Peggy lifted the blanket and saw there were no insects in the cage.

“They’re OK,” Peggy said relieved.

They sat down by the cage. Peggy wondered what to do next. There were even more insects in the RV. What if the lamp burns out she thought. They had to do something. They couldn't just sit there and wait for that to happen. She watched as the insects crawled into the cabinets.

"They are going to eat all our food," Phil said. "We have to get them out of here."

Peggy wondered why they didn't come near the lantern. She thought they must be afraid of the fire. They needed to light more fires but they didn't have any more lamps or even a candle.

"We need to light another fire but I don't know what to burn," Peggy told Phil.

"How about we rip out pages of your journal and burn them?" Phil suggested.

"No way! We're not burning my journal,"

Peggy thought for a moment and wondered what else they could burn. She really didn't want to burn her book. Then she remembered the map.

"How about we burn the map?" Peggy said.

"OK," Phil agreed.

Peggy grabbed the lantern and stood up. Phil stood up and held onto Peggy.

"I think if we're quick the rabbits will be OK," Peggy said.

Phil nodded. There were so many insects in the RV she could barely see the front of the RV. As they walked, the insects flew away from them.

Peggy stopped and grabbed the matches off the table. Phil looked back at the rabbits.

“Hurry! There are too many of them,” Phil said.

Peggy tried to go faster. She was so scared that moving too fast would cause the flame to blow out. Plus, she wanted to give the insects time to move away from them. Finally, they reached the front of the RV and saw the map. Phil grabbed it as soon as the insects flew off it. They turned and made their way back through the swarm of insects. They moved faster and faster keeping a close eye on the lantern. They finally got to the bunk bed and sat back down only to see insects flying out from under the blanket covered the cage.

“No! Get away!” Peggy shouted as she quickly set down the lantern and lifted the blanket. There were insects all over the rabbits but they were flying off as they frantically tried to get away from the lantern. They bounced off the cage walls, crawled through the openings in the cage bars, and flew off. None of the rabbits moved. Phil dropped the map and opened the cage door. He pulled out the brown rabbit and held it.

“No,” Phil said and cried. “They killed them.”

“Are you sure? It can’t be. Could they be sleeping?” Peggy asked.

Phil set down the brown rabbit and pulled out the black and white spotted rabbit. It was limp in his hands. Phil looked at Peggy and shook his head no. Peggy noticed the little chickadee clung to Phil’s shoulder. She was glad it was safe but felt angry the insects killed the rabbits. She wanted

the insects to go away. She grabbed the map and took out a match. Peggy put the match under the map and it quickly caught fire. Peggy was surprised by how fast it burned and had to throw it away. It landed near the bottom of a cabinet. The flames reached up towards the cabinet. The insects moved away from the flames so they wouldn't be burned. The cabinet began to smoke from the heat of the flames under it but didn't catch fire as map burned out and nothing was left but black ashes on the floor. A thick fog of smoke filled the RV and Peggy to coughed and covered her mouth. The chickadee panicked and flew off Phil's shoulder to get away from the smoke. Insects attacked the chickadee and it dropped to the floor.

"No!" screamed Phil and Peggy at once.

They moved toward the chickadee shooing off the insects with the glowing light of their lamp but they knew it was too late.

Phil put his hand over his mouth as he coughed and said, "I want to get out of here!"

"Me too," Peggy replied.

Once outside of the RV, Peggy turned away from the lodge so she didn't have to look at what was left of Peter and Vicki. They walked away from the insect swarm as fast as they could but when the lantern flickered they had to slow down. She hoped they could get away before the lantern burned out.

Chapter 10

Solana lay in bed and felt miserable. She wanted to give up. She thought about killing herself and ending it all. The world was dying and so was everything and everyone that she loved. Her baby kicked her belly as if to remind her she still had her baby. Solana looked out the window. It looked like a sunny day. The trees were green outside of her window. The Earth's poison had not yet reached this place. What she really wanted was to get to the United States and to the safe place. She imagined it was a place with green trees and fresh air and good people. She needed a safe place to raise her baby. She sat up and decided she would find a way to escape. She would travel to the U.S. even if she had to do it by herself. Yet she felt scared as she realized she might end up giving birth alone. No, she pushed that thought away. She would worry about that when the time came. The door to the bedroom opened and Shekinah walked in. She wore a faded t-shirt, khaki pants and sandals. She carried two small baskets lined with white cloth.

Shekinah announced, "Solana! You've been sulking in here for four days. It's time to get out and get some fresh air. You're going to help me gather eggs and I don't want to hear any complaint out of you."

"Sure," Solana replied with a slight smile.

"Huh?" Shekinah sounded surprised, "Uh, well good."

Solana liked Shekinah and was happy to help her. It would also give her a chance to look around to try to find a way to escape. She stood up, slipped on sandals and grabbed a basket from Shekinah.

“Lead the way,” Solana said.

Shekinah smiled and walked out of the bedroom. Solana had been staying in one of the stand-alone hotel suites. She stepped out onto a grassy area with other small buildings lined up. They were next to the main lodge. Shekinah led Solana to the far side of the main lodge. They approached a ticket gate with turnstiles. There was a guard standing there. Shekinah ignored the guard and went through the turnstiles. They followed a path through the forest. The path came up to several stone buildings of the Incan Machu Picchu ruins. Another guard stood by the buildings. He looked out over the ruins and didn’t turn to look at Shekinah or Solana as they walked past. They walked along a stone terrace. Solana paused to look at the ruins in front of her. It was beautiful. Corn grew on the terraces above her to the left blocking her view. To the right the terraces dropped down in steep wide steps. There was freshly plowed dirt in those terraces so she was able to see all the way down to the Urubamba River about 1500 feet below. She suddenly felt like she might fall as if the emptiness could suck her right off the path and over the cliff side. She looked back at the stone path and ruins beyond. They were high above the main area of the ruins. In the center of the ruins were several wide and long grassy fields where llamas and alpacas grazed. Stone buildings with thatched roofs crowded the ruins on both sides

of the field. Centered directly behind Machu Picchu was the tall triangular-shaped peak of the Huayna Picchu Mountain. The middle of the mountain was obscured by a thin cloud that slowly drifted past.

The path ended at a flight of steep stairs that went down to the right and up to the left. Shekinah turned to the left to lead them even higher still. There was a stone wall on one side of the stairs and the terraces full of corn on the other side. Solana had to slow down to catch her breath. Shekinah noticed Solana and slowed down too.

“I’m sorry, Shekinah.”

“It’s OK. It’s only a little further up. I know where the chickens like to nest. I’m hoping we will find enough eggs there and be done,” Shekinah told Solana as they continued to slowly climb the stairs. Solana’s soft yellow dress blew in the wind as they neared the top of the stairs.

Finally, they reached the top and Shekinah turned right to follow an alley between the stone walled buildings. Then she stopped at an opening on her left and stepped over a short stone wall. They stepped into a dirt yard surrounded by stone walls. There was another short wall to their right. Several chickens scratched and pecked at the dirt in the yard. Solana looked around but didn’t see any eggs.

“This way,” Shekinah said with a wave.

Solana looked up and followed Shekinah over another half wall into a larger yard. Chickens wandered about and then they scattered away from

them as they walked by. In front of them was a small building with a thatched roof. Shekinah stopped before she went into the building.

Shekinah opened a cloth bag from her basket and said, “Help me feed them. It will help distract them from the eggs.”

Solana noticed a bag of chicken feed was in her basket as well. She opened her bag and saw a mix of seeds, grains and hay. Solana grabbed a handful of feed, and tossed it out onto the ground. Chickens ran in from all directions and a flock of chickens surrounded them.

“Come on, let’s grab some eggs,” Shekinah said as she turned and entered the building.

Inside the building, there were wooden shelves with nests of straw. Solana and Shekinah gathered all the eggs they could find and then left the building. The chickens were still distracted as they searched the dirt for food.

“This way, Solana. We need to find more eggs. I know a few more places where we can find them,” Shekinah said.

Shekinah weaved her way through the buildings and down several short stairways. They passed buildings with cloth hanging to cover the doorways. One tired looking woman swept out her home with the cloth door pushed aside. The woman never even looked up as they passed.

Solana felt her abdomen muscles tighten as they walked past a field of large boulders. The boulders were randomly strewn across the field as if they had rained down from the sky. The contraction tightened harder and

Solana placed her hand on her belly. She wished she could sit down and rest but she continued to walk. After a minute, the contraction released and it was easier to walk again.

“Not far now, Solana. The chickens are over there in an area that was called the Sacred Plaza.”

They followed a path beside a stone wall. The right side of the path overlooked several wide terraces stepped down to the center grassy field. The herd of llama and alpaca were grazing casually. Solana paused to watch them graze. She envied how calm and happy they looked. A pang of homesickness went through Solana and tears began to fill her eyes. She wanted to go home. She wanted to go home to her real home, the sunflower farm. Solana knew this was never going to happen. Her home was destroyed and gone forever. She looked up the path and realized Shekinah was gone. Suddenly, Shekinah’s head popped around the end of the stone wall.

“Are you coming?” Shekinah asked.

“Yes, I’m coming.”

Solana hurried to catch up. She turned the corner around the stone wall and stopped to take in the view. The plaza was roughly rectangular shaped with a large flat dirt floor. It had stone walled buildings on three sides and open on the side that faced the mountains. The open side was edged with stones to keep the plaza from sliding down the eastern cliff. She stared out at the mountains and then noticed that chickens surrounded her

feet. They also surrounded Shekinah who was tossed feed onto the ground. Solana tossed out feed as well. She wondered what kind of seeds were in the chicken feed. She remembered all of the seeds listed in the book. She wondered if she really needed the book if she brought everything they required. Solana had put the book inside the pack on her horse and now it was gone. She had the key in her thumbnail. That would be enough she decided. What she needed was a plan to escape.

“Shekinah?”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Would you help me escape from here? They’re going to take my baby and I can’t let them do that!”

“What! Are you sure?”

“Yes, your Queen Reia told me herself. They plan to raise my baby as their own.”

After a moment, Shekinah came closer to Solana and looked around. Nervously she put her hand on Solana’s shoulder and whispered, “I think I can help you but it won’t be easy. Reia has guards everywhere that are very loyal to her.” Shekinah stopped and looked around again. “We should keep gathering eggs so we don’t look suspicious.”

Solana looked around and noticed how many people were walking about. She thought they were all just regular people doing their chores but now she wasn’t sure. Shekinah walked into one of the buildings and

gathered eggs. Solana caught up and asked her quietly, “How can you tell who is a guard?”

“You have to get to know them. Just be careful and don’t trust anyone, OK?”

Shekinah chased a chicken out of its nest on a window ledge and grabbed a couple of eggs. The windows in this room were closed leaving only a rectangular shaped indent in the wall backed by stone. The chickens seemed to think it was perfect for roosting. Solana checked the other two closed windows for eggs.

“Why did they make windows only to block them closed?” Solana asked not really expecting an answer.

Shekinah shrugged, “Who knows, maybe to store things. Or maybe they were made for chickens.”

Solana looked at the windows. They were much taller than they needed to be for a chicken roost. No, she thought it had to be some other reason. Solana decided to joke, “They must have had really tall chickens back then.”

Shekinah chuckled and searched for more eggs. They went to the other three rooms that surrounded the plaza. Finally, their baskets were full and nearly overflowing with eggs. They threw out the rest of the chicken feed to make room for the eggs.

“Shekinah, I’m going to the United States because there is a safe place to live. I’d like it if you would come with me.”

“What kind of safe place to live? A place like this?”

Solana was taken aback by that statement. She searched her heart for a moment and replied, “No, I think… no, I know in my heart it will be good there. I have to find a way to get there but I’m running out of time. Please, I really need your help.”

“What do you mean you are running out of time?”

“I have to be in Colorado no later than noon on August 12th to meet the leaders of my new home. This way they keep the real location a secret.”

Solana told Shekinah everything she knew about Teal Haven and the book. She told her about the animals and seeds she had to gather. Shekinah listened without saying anything. After Solana finished, Shekinah gestured for her to follow. She walked to the edge of the plaza overlooking the mountains. She stopped in a semi-circular shaped balcony that offered an amazing view of the valley below. The Urubamba River snaked its way between the surrounding mountains. Shekinah glanced behind her before beginning, “There is a raft hidden down by the river. If we could get to it before anyone misses us I think we might be able to escape.”

“We?” Solana asked smiling.

Shekinah nodded, smiled and continued, “The guards watch the roads and paths out of here all day and night but, I think we might be able to get Jayden to help. He keeps asking about you. I think he really likes you.”

“Jayden? He is the reason I’m trapped here! I trusted him and look what it got me.”

“He might be our only hope to get out of here. Just listen Solana. Jayden is one of the guards yes but he isn’t really like them. He hates Reia. Reia forced his younger sister to work so hard she died from pneumonia. That was his only family left alive. He might even go with us if you ask him. He feels really bad that he brought you here but he didn’t know what else to do.”

Shekinah started walking again and Solana followed barely paying attention to where they were going.

She hated Jayden for bringing her here but suddenly she felt bad for him too. Could she trust him? She thought she could trust Shekinah and she seemed to trust him so maybe she should give Jayden a chance. Out of breath, Solana realized they were climbing a long flight of stairs. Curiosity snapped her out of her thoughts to look around. They reached a landing only to turn directions and climb another flight of stairs. At last, they reached the top and Solana was so tired she sat down on the top stair to rest. Shekinah sat down next to her.

“OK, let’s ask Jayden for help but I’m not saying I trust him.”

“It’s OK. You’ll see Jayden has a good heart.” Shekinah said. “I brought you up here to show you something. I have a feeling about you Solana. You seem different from the others. There is something…special in your eyes.”

Solana looked at Shekinah and thought she was getting weird, “What are you talking about?”

“It’s stupid I know but, there is magic in your eyes. I’m curious if the stone will work for you. Come on I’ll show you,” Shekinah got up and walked on as she continued “We are standing on something like a pyramid. It is a naturally formed pyramid not man-made,” she climbed a few steps to the highest level on the pyramid and continued, “This pyramid seems to channel the energy of the surrounding mountains. It is all drawn into this one stone called the Intihuatana. Right there,” Shekinah stopped and pointed at a stone table with a triangular-shaped stone pillar in the center.

The pillar in the center of the stone table looked like a pedestal for a trophy or religious artifact. There was wide step carved into the stone table, which looked like a place to kneel and pray. Solana imagined a sun carved of gold sitting on top of pedestal or maybe a crystal skull reflecting the light of the sun.

“This doesn’t look magic. It looks like a place of prayer,” Solana said.

“You might be right but there is something very special about it. The Intihuatana is perfectly placed so the sun lines up directly overhead during the equinox. They say its power is greatest at that time.”

“This is great Shekinah but no offense and all but I need to work on escaping from here not studying ancient cultures. Besides, it’s not even close to an equinox. The equinox is not until late September.”

“But Solana I really think the stone can help you. The Intihuatana should work any time of year. It just works better on the equinox. They say certain people who are sensitive enough can get visions from it. It’s like a

window to the spirit world. You have to touch your forehead to the Intihuatana."

Solana looked at it. She never believed in the supernatural. She was taught to be practical in life. Non-sense like this never helped put food on the table as her mother would say. She missed her mother and couldn't bear to think she might be gone.

"Just try it Solana. What harm could be done. If nothing happens then you can call me crazy and I'll never bother you about this kind of stuff again."

"And you'll help convince Jayden to help us?"

"Yes, yes. Just try it for me."

"Fine, but I really don't believe in magic. If there was magic, then why doesn't a witch wave her magic wand and fix the world?"

Solana didn't wait for an answer and stepped up onto the step of the table. It was a deep step so she took a couple of small steps forward and leaned her body against the stone table. She reached out and touched the stone pillar with her hands. It felt like ordinary stone she thought.

"I don't feel anything Shekinah."

"You have to put your forehead on the stone."

Solana leaned her head forward but knew she wasn't going to reach the stone. She let out a deep sigh and climbed up onto the top of the table. The stone was digging into her knees so she stood up. She held onto the pedestal for support. It wasn't tall enough for her to stand straight up so

she let go and stood up. The wind blew Solana's hair back like a river of black silk flowing from her face. Her yellow chiffon dress fluttered in the wind behind her and pulled tight against her body outlining her round pregnant belly. Solana looked around at the surrounding mountains taking in all their beauty. At that moment, she understood why the Incas believed it was a sacred place.

"It's beautiful up here!"

Shekinah stepped up on the first step of the table and looked around with Solana. They both took a deep breath and let it out. Then they looked at each other and smiled. Solana knew the pleasure of taking in a deep breath of fresh air was going to end soon even here. Thinking of the poisons brought back the urgency to reach her destination before it is too late.

"So, I need to put my forehead onto the stone, right?" Solana said as she held onto the stone, bent down and gently placed her forehead onto the top of the stone.

"I don't feel anything," Solana said as she lifted her head up and looked at Shekinah feeling foolish.

"You have to give a minute. Clear your mind and relax."

Solana tried again. This time she closed her eyes and took another deep breath. She let the breath out slowly and relaxed. Solana felt tired and thought of going back to her room for a nap. She stopped herself from thinking and cleared her mind. It was hard to think of nothing so she just paid attention to her heart beating and took slow deliberate breaths. Solana

was about to pull away when she felt tingling in her hands. She shifted her hands thinking they weren't getting enough blood. Suddenly, she felt the feeling of falling like the ground had disappeared. She instinctively gripped tighter to the stone. Fear coursed through her blood and she was about to open her eyes when she saw a large tree in front of her. She fell toward the tree but then she leveled off easing the sensation of falling. It was a clear night with many stars shining brightly in the sky. The tree looked very old yet strong and healthy. Its branches reached up high and out as wide as it was tall. Then she saw a ship sailing through the sky towards the tree. When the ship got close to the tree, it turned into stars with the stars on the keel of the ship shining the brightest.

Solana woke up and looked out over the mountains thinking about the dream. It was a beautiful scene that made her feel at ease.

"So, did you get anything?" Shekinah asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm so tired. I think I fell asleep for a second."

"You were standing Solana. You must be tired if you fell asleep that fast."

"Yeah, I am really tired. But before we go back I want to try to find Jayden."

"OK. I think we might find him in that area over there," Shekinah said and pointed to the cluster of buildings on the other side of the long grassy center field.

"Great, way over there? Of course, he would be. Let's go."

As they walked through the maze of stone, Solana told Shekinah about the dream. Shekinah was excited and insisted it was a real vision. A vision from the spirit world but Solana wasn't convinced.

"I think it was a dream. I mean why would a ship sail through the sky and then turn into stars?"

"It makes sense to me, Solana. The ship is a constellation. Actually, it is three constellations. They're called Vela the sails, Carina the keel and Puppis the stern. You said the keel was much brighter than the other stars, which is strange because they aren't normally brighter. Wait, maybe it has to do with your journey that you need to be like a keel and stay strong moving toward your destination. Plus, the way you described that tree makes me think it might be the tree of life. Oh my god, Solana can't you see? The stone is telling you to keep going toward your destination because it's the key to life!" Shekinah said excitedly.

"Wow, Shekinah, where did you learn all of that about the stars and stuff?"

"Ah, well, my Dad was big on astronomy and my mother loved astrology. It was a weird combination but they taught me a lot about reading the stars. I can't believe you had such a profound vision! It's so exciting."

"I guess so, but how does it help me get out of here?"

They walked by some teen boys that were arguing.

“It’s my turn Dylan! You got to play with it all day,” the young blonde boy said as he tried to pry the hand-held video game system out of the other boy’s hands.

“It’s mine and I don’t have to share it with you,” a slightly taller dark-haired boy shouted back.

“But Ben, you said you’d give me a turn if I did your chores! Besides you got to play games with that wildfire626 boy and I want a turn before he’s gone.”

“He’s already gone. It’s too late,” Ben said.

“What?” Solana turned back around and approached the boys. “Did you say you were playing games with wildfire626?”

“Yeah, so what?” Ben replied as both boys stopped fighting and backed up.

“Wait, I don’t want to hurt you. Wildfire626 is my cousin’s ID. When did you last play online with him?”

“Yesterday, we were playing zombie wars but, he kept getting disconnected. He said they were travelling and thought we would lose connection soon. Next thing I know he was gone,” Ben said.

“Yesterday! Really? Did he say whom he was with or where they were going? Can you try to see if he is still online?”

“No. Look lady, all I know is he travelled out of range for our devices to connect. He’s not there now,” Ben said as he quickly checked again. Ben tilted the screen to show Solana. The list of available players was empty.

Ben continued, “It’s too bad he’s gone. He was a good gamer.”

Dylan complained, “Awww, why didn’t you let me have a turn Ben!”

“Shut up, Dylan,” Ben said, “Can’t you see this lady is trying to find her cousin?”

Dylan blushed and looked down.

“I think my family or at least my cousin is still alive! I have to find him. Would you be willing to trade for your video game?” Solana asked not knowing what she could trade if he agreed.

“No way, it’s the only thing I’ve got to do for fun,” Ben said taking a step back while pulling the game closer to his body.

“Please, it’s the only way I can find him. There are lots of games you can play.”

“No way!” Ben said as he turned, and ran.

Solana tried to grab Ben’s friend Dylan before he ran too but Dylan jumped out of reach and ran after Ben.

“Wait!” Solana started to chase after them but stopped when she realized she was too slow.

After Solana calmed down, they continued to search for Jayden. She decided it was enough to know her cousin Jose was still alive and travelling, which probably meant more of her family was alive. They had to be headed for Teal Haven so if she escaped here maybe she could catch up to them or meet them there. It wasn’t long before they found Jayden sitting on a rock staring out over the valley below. There was no one around and it was clear

he was in no mood to play guard for the queen. Solana and Shekinah sat down beside him and told him their plans to escape.

“The boat will never work, it’s too slow,” Jayden told the girls. “It’s a nice idea. How did you know about that boat anyway Shekinah?”

“I overheard some men talking about it.”

Jayden replied, “Anyway, I have better idea. How about we use the Jeep? We will need to get as far away from this place as we can before they realize we’re gone.”

“But won’t they hear us leaving?” Shekinah asked.

Solana added smiling at Jayden, “We could drift down the mountain in neutral.”

“Right, Solana, we can start the engine when we get to the bottom and they will never hear it.”

Shekinah asked, “What about the front door guards? Won’t they see us going down the road?”

“Yes, but…can you be ready to leave tonight?” Jayden asked.

“I’m ready to leave now!” Solana blurted.

“Tonight? I guess so. Why?” Shekinah asked.

“Because Owen and I have watch duty tonight, but luck is on our side. Owen is sick and I was told to handle it alone.”

“Isn’t that a little too perfect,” Solana said a little suspicious.

Shekinah answered for Jayden, “He’s telling the truth Solana. I saw Owen throwing up over a stone wall yesterday. It was gross and I got away from him fast.”

“Sorry, I’m not sure who I can trust,” Solana said.

Jayden replied, “Look, I have wanted to leave this place too but I had nowhere to go. Please, trust me. I think we can help each other.”

“It seems I don’t have any choice if I want to get out of here I need your help.”

“All right good, let’s meet out front tonight. Solana remember where I parked the Jeep when I first brought you here?”

Solana nodded and glanced at Shekinah who seemed to understand as well.

Jayden continued, “We’ll meet at two in the morning at that spot. My guard duty starts at ten o’clock but I want to be sure that everyone is sleeping. I always hear people awake until around one o’clock. So, we will wait an hour past that to be safe.”

“We’ll gather up as much food and supplies as we can,” Shekinah said.

“Good. See you then,” Jayden said and turned to Solana. He reached out and took her hand. “Solana, please accept my sincerest apologies for bringing you here. I had no idea the queen would try to take your baby,” Jayden pulled Solana’s hand up to his mouth and gently kissed the back of her hand.

“Apology accepted,” Solana said after a moment.

Jayden smiled and turned to walk away.

Chapter 11

Solana and Shekinah spent the rest of the day looking for supplies. Shekinah took Solana to the seed storage building and they quietly filled bags with seeds. She was surprised to have found so many of the seeds she needed. They had alfalfa and oats for feeding the llama. They had sunflower seeds and grape seeds. Shekinah said they grew grapes down by the river so they could make wine. There were even tomato, sugarcane and apple seeds. That only left seeds for yerba mate and olive trees. They hid the sacks of seeds and then delivered the eggs to the chef at the lodge and asked for work.

The chef put them to work washing dishes. While he wasn't looking, Shekinah went into the food storage room and stuffed food into a sack. Then they slipped out the door. Solana was surprised how easy it was to sneak around. The queen had her believing there was no way to escape. Solana smiled at the thought of the queen screaming in anger when she discovers them missing. They were finished gathering supplies so Shekinah walked Solana back to her room.

"Get some sleep and I'll come get you around 1:30am," she whispered. "We'll need time to gather all our hidden supplies.

Solana nodded, "See you."

Shekinah closed the door and Solana walked over to her bed and collapsed onto it. She was exhausted. Yet she was too excited to sleep so she lay on the bed with her eyes wide open. What could go wrong she wondered? It seemed too easy. They were going to gather their things and just walk out of here. A feeling of doom crept over her. She hoped it was only nerves. It must have been fate that Owen was sick. The queen had caused her own misfortune by over working her people. Solana calmed herself and finally let sleep take over her mind.

“Solana,” Shekinah whispered as she gently shook Solana.

Solana sat up and rubbed her eyes. Adrenaline flowed into her veins and the grogginess of sleep instantly left her. It was time. She nodded and stood up. Without talking, they quietly headed out to gather their hidden sacks of treasure. As they approached the ruins, they saw a guard. He was walking away from them towards the back of the ruins. They waited in the shadows until he was out of sight and then continued. They found the bags of seeds and quickly returned to the back of the lodge. There they gathered the remaining bags. Shekinah carried three bags of food and one bag of blankets and extra clothes. Solana carried the bags of seed and another large bag miscellaneous supplies as Shekinah had described it. Solana wondered what was in the bag but figured she would find out soon enough. Sneaking was harder now that they carried so many heavy bags. They made their way around the side of the lodge as quietly as they could. They looked around to the front of the lodge and didn’t see anyone.

“Where is he?” Solana whispered.

Shekinah looked and whispered back, “Let’s get to the spot and he’ll be there soon.”

Solana nodded and they started out. They went to the far edge of the parking lot and used the trees as cover. Solana kept looking at the lodge fearing someone would look out the window at any moment. The blinds were closed and dark. Solana saw the Jeep parked at the other end of the parking lot. Solana stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Shekinah whispered.

“Nothing, I just thought the Jeep would be closer. It’s not how I remember it.”

Solana started walking again. Something didn’t feel right to her. She stopped again.

“Where do the guards usually stand?” Solana asked,

“At the front door.”

Solana looked up the stone stairs but couldn’t see anyone. It was too dark.

“Keep moving,” Shekinah whispered.

Solana started walking again. The front door of the lodge opened and Solana froze.

“I’m perfectly fine guarding by myself,” Jayden said loudly as he backed out of the lodge. “You must be tired after guarding all day.”

A large bald man followed Jayden out of the lodge with his arms crossed. He simply grunted at Jayden and pushed past him.

Solana looked around but there was nowhere to hide. If they ran, the movement would surely give them away. They stood by a tree and tried to blend into the darkness. Solana recognized the bald man as the man who pushed Jayden around during the dinner with the king and queen. She hoped Jayden could convince him to leave before his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Solana realized she was holding her breath and tried to calm down. Jayden was the first to see them. Solana saw him look at her eyes. Jayden's eyes widened with fear and he quickly turned to the bald man.

"Hey!" Jayden said playfully punching the man in the arm, "How about we go find Martina and her girls for a little fun tonight? I've got a stash of chica to loosen them up."

The bald man turned and looked at Jayden considering his idea.

"Come on man," Jayden said and grabbed his arm to lead him back into the lodge.

The bald man instantly stepped back and pulled out of Jayden's grip. Then he stopped and stared right at Solana. Solana dared not move just in case he didn't see her. No, he saw her all right. He took one look at Jayden and then back at her.

"What do you…" Jayden sentence was cut short by the bald man's fist coming across his jaw. Jayden flew back and landed unconscious.

"Run!" Shekinah said and pushed Solana.

Solana dropped the bags and ran for the Jeep. She was only half-way there when she felt a large hand grab her hair and yank roughly backwards. Solana squealed in pain and reached up to grab at the hand as she was pulled towards the ground. Her butt bounced off the ground and she was drug across the pavement by the roots of her hair. Kicking and fighting didn't help as both she and Shekinah were pulled up the stone steps and into the lodge.

All three of them were locked in a small empty room. Solana sat on the floor holding Shekinah who sobbed. Jayden paced the floor. He banged on the door and tried to force it open.

"We are so dead," Jayden said as he paced a few more times and then kicked the door.

After a few hours, Jayden gave up and sat down next to Solana.

Solana woke to the voices of Shekinah and Jayden talking.

"What will they do to us?" Shekinah asked.

"I'm not sure how but we will be put to death. Let's hope it's a fast death," Jayden said.

"Oh, my God! There are so many awful ways they have killed people," Shekinah started to cry again.

"We can't give up yet," Solana said.

Jayden replied, "What do you suggest Solana? There are too many of them to fight."

The door opened and the large bald man stepped into the room. Mohawk, Queen Reia and King Santos followed him.

“Your punishment has been decided,” Reia stated without emotion. “Jayden and Shekinah will receive death by pumas.”

“No!” Shekinah shrieked and tried to run for the door. Mohawk simply stuck his foot out tripping her and pushed her in the back at the same time. Shekinah landed hard. Jayden got up to attack Mohawk but the bald man grabbed Jayden and held his arms behind his back. Mohawk grabbed Shekinah’s arms and pulled her back up. Blood ran out of Shekinah’s nose and tears ran down her face.

“Mohawk! Don’t damage my puma’s food,” Reia said and continued, “Solana, since you are new we will grant you a lesser punishment. You will be allowed to live. You will watch your friends die and then live as a slave. What a shame Solana, we were so kind offering you our nicest room and bed. Our food and the best care for your child and this is how you repay us. This is how you repay your friends by getting them killed?”

“You are no queen! You are nothing but a bitch!” Solana shouted.

Queen Reia slapped Solana across the face, turned, and left. Mohawk led Shekinah out of the room. She kicked and fought with all her might. Another guard joined Mohawk and grabbed Shekinah’s legs and they carried her out. The large bald man simply shoved Jayden toward the door. Jayden reluctantly followed Shekinah. After they left the room, two more guards came in and grabbed Solana’s arms and led her out. A parade of

people formed as they headed out towards the ruins. It was a misty morning with fog shrouding the ruins. Shekinah cried and pleaded for her life as they marched further into the ruins. The fear and desperation in Shekinah's voice became more and more apparent as they walked down steps and followed a level dirt path that cut across the center field. They turned and headed past the stone walls. The crowd split up but the guards continued to push Solana in the direction they were taking Shekinah and Jayden. The guard stopped at the entrance of a room that had entranceways leading into it from almost every direction. Shekinah and Jayden were taken to the center of the room. Their hands were tied behind their backs and then they were tied to each other back to back. They were forced to sit on a flat rock that was imbedded in the dirt. The rock was triangular shaped with a curved beak carved out of the point. There was a semi-circular rock surrounding the beak and tip of the rock. The rock was made to resemble the head of a condor. Directly behind the condor's head, were two rock walls carved in the shape of the large outstretched wings of a condor. Below the left wing, there was a small cave with an iron gate blocking the entrance. Solana glanced up and saw Queen Reia and King Santos standing behind a stone wall right between the condor's outstretched wings. They appeared to be standing on a balcony made for viewing the carnage below. There were people climbing onto the walls of the room to get a better view. A few of the people were looking at the ground and seemed upset.

Suddenly, the noise from the crowd died down and everyone looked up at the king and queen.

Solana saw that the king had raised his hand and waited for the crowd to quiet.

The king spoke with a powerfully loud voice, “These two traitors were found guilty of theft and abandonment. They planned to steal our food, seeds and more and run off into the night. They had no care about our lives or our way of life. This kind of evil behavior threatens us all.”

Boos and shouts were heard from the crowd. The king raised his hand again quieting the outbreak.

“There is a third person involved who inspired their actions,” the king said and pointed towards her. “Solana, you are responsible for the death of these two people. Your evil will cause them a painfully long death. You will watch and then spend the rest of your life as a personal slave for Mohawk.” King Santos gestured downward to the bottom of the stairs where Mohawk stood smiling.

A sick feeling overcame Solana and she had to look away from Mohawk’s chilling smile. She would never serve him. They could never force her. She would rather die. The king continued as if reading her mind.

“She will serve him well or her child will be put to death in the same manner as her friends and she will be forced to watch.”

The king paused while the crowd burst into noise. Solana felt weak, nauseous, and nearly collapsed onto the ground. The guard tightened his grip on her arm forcing her to stand.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” King Santos said as he stared down at her frowning.

The guard pulled Solana into the room where everyone could look at her. So many people were booed and shouted. Solana looked around at all the faces. Most of the people stared and yelled angrily. They seemed to be everywhere. They stood on the stairway leading up to the upper level. They stood in open doorways and on top of a large boulder on one side of the room. Solana was scared and didn’t know what to say. Solana looked at Shekinah who shook with fear.

“Do you think it’s right to have Shekinah and Jayden killed because they want their freedom? You are not a king and queen but wardens of a prison!” Solana shouted.

Solana was pulled back away from the center as she continued, “Let them go! They did nothing wrong.”

Jayden looked up at Solana. He had tears running down his cheeks yet he still struggled to break free from the ropes binding him.

“Enough! Let the execution begin! Release the pumas,” shouted Queen Reia.

Mohawk stepped off the bottom step and walked towards the iron gate. Mohawk picked up a rope that was lying on the ground. It was tied to

the latch on the gate. Mohawk jerked the rope and released the latch. Then he pulled on another rope, swinging the gate open. He quickly jogged back to the step where he was standing. The crowd was silent. All eyes strained to see into the black depths of the cave beneath the condor's wing. Suddenly, a sleek golden-colored male puma sprinted out of the cave dragging behind it the heavy chain. The chain was attached to a collar around his neck. He trotted out into the room and looked up at all the people. The puma hissed up at the people on the wall above him. He turned and paced back towards the entrance of the cave as another smaller, tan-colored female puma appeared at the entrance. The male puma bumped against the female and they both turned to face Shekinah and Jayden. They lowered their heads and stood still a moment regarding their prey. Shekinah was frozen with fear and Jayden twisted his head around to see the pumas. The pumas slowly moved towards Shekinah as if they were stalking their prey and at any moment, the chase would begin.

"No!" Solana shouted and elbowed the guard that was holding her.

The guard doubled over and let go of Solana. She ran out to Shekinah. One of the other guards started to chase after Solana but stopped as the male puma pounced in his direction. The puma reached the end of his chain barely missing the guard. Solana lay down next to Shekinah and wrapped her arms around her protectively.

“I won’t let them hurt you,” Solana whispered to Shekinah as she tried to untie the ropes binding her arms. The ropes were tight and Solana was having trouble untying them.

“Watch out Solana!” Jayden shouted.

Solana noticed Jayden’s eyes were on the puma behind her. Solana stopped fiddling with the ropes and slowly turned around. The male puma was pacing with his chain pulled tight. The guard he had just missed taunted him and laughed. Then Solana’s eyes met the female puma’s intense stare. Fear flooded Solana’s body as she stared back at the puma. The female puma was in a perfectly still pouncing stance, her eyes fixed on Solana. Solana knew at any moment it would be all over. She knew trying to run away would cause the puma to pounce. Solana turned to look up at the queen who was smiling. Once again, Solana felt her fear turn to intense anger and the crouching puma was no longer important.

Solana stood up to face Reia, “You bitch! I will haunt you for the rest of your life!”

The female puma snarled loudly and clawed at the air. Solana glanced at the puma and was surprised to see the puma was directing her snarls at Reia. Solana thought she could feel the puma’s anger. There was a strange feeling of connection between them that Solana didn’t understand. She felt the puma’s hunger and longing to be free but those feelings paled in comparison to her hatred for Reia.

“You hate her too don’t you?” Solana asked the puma and kneeled down to her level.

The puma looked at Solana with understanding eyes. The intense hunter’s stare was gone. Solana put her hand out palm down, “I won’t hurt you girl.”

The female puma walked up to her hand without fear sniffed it a second and rubbed her head against it like a kitten wishing to be petted. Solana smiled as she began to pet the side of the puma’s head. Solana realized the crowd had been silent and was about to look up when the male puma jumped onto the female puma’s head knocking both her and Solana over. The puma turned and rubbed his head against Solana. Solana reached up and held onto his strong shoulders as the puma pulled her back up onto her knees.

“Solana?” Shekinah asked quietly looking up from a daze.

“It’s going to be all right Shekinah,” Solana said as she unhooked the male puma’s collar.

“Guards! Stop her!” shouted Reia.

Solana looked around and noticed no one moved.

“Solana is the true queen!” a woman shouted from the crowd.

“Solana the queen,” a man confirmed.

“No, I am your queen. Those are my pumas!” Reia shouted.

“Solana, Solana,” the crowd began to chant.

Solana unhooked the female puma's collar as well. Then she turned and undid the ropes binding Jayden and Shekinah. Jayden helped Shekinah stand. The crowd quieted down and Solana glanced up to see King Santos standing with his hands up.

"We have found our true queen!" King Santos announced.

"What?" Reia exclaimed looking disbelievingly at Santos. "You can't do that to me!"

"The Gods have given us a sign," King Santos continued ignoring Reia. "The pumas with their ancient wisdom of the Earth have chosen Solana."

The crowd began to bow down to Solana as King Santos paused. Solana didn't want to be anyone's queen but didn't want to contradict the notion if it meant she could save her friend's lives. King Santos had pushed aside the raving Reia, walked down the stairs and stepped onto the dirt. He stopped near the bottom of the stairs because the pumas were watching him approach suspiciously.

"Solana, please accept our apologies for this misunderstanding. We will aide you in whatever you wish," King Santos said and bowed.

Chapter 12

The pickup truck bounced over yet another pothole in the road. Surprisingly, the male puma didn't wake from its slumber. It was stretched out lying on its side on top of the backpacks that were stuffed full of supplies and clothing. The puma was took up almost half of the pickup truck bed. The female puma sat next to Solana and watched the countryside. Jayden drove the truck and Shekinah sat in the passenger seat. Shekinah had offered Solana the passenger seat but Solana thought it would be better if she rode in the back with the pumas. Solana was amazed how the people of Machu Picchu changed after the pumas became her friend. They must have thought if she wasn't happy, they would be cursed with bad luck. So they showered her, Jayden and Shekinah with gifts, food and supplies. Even the pumas were fed fresh llama meat before they left. Once the people found out she wanted the video game system, they pushed the boy, Ben, to hand it over. Solana felt bad for him but she knew it was her best chance at finding her family again. Just as they were about to leave, Isabella walked up to Solana and handed her the moon shoes and told her, "Take care of that baby."

The Jeep was too small for the pumas and all their gear so they were given an old pickup truck instead. They had been traveling all day heading north. The heat was stifling even with the wind. Solana opened the canteen of water and took a long drink. Then she poured some of the water on her

head. She poured the rest of the water in a bowl for the pumas. The female puma got up and drank. Solana reached out and touched the puma as she drank her fill. She immediately felt the pumas' happiness making Solana smile. She wondered why she could feel the puma's feelings. They seemed to sense hers as well. Shekinah told her the Intihuatana Stone must have opened her mind to a new level. She said it was a gift from the spirits. However, Jayden thought it was more likely that she was evolving in some strange new way especially since she was pregnant. He thought the pregnancy might make her more susceptible to changes. Solana thought it was weird and scary but she liked being able to sense their thoughts.

A beeping sound came from her backpack. She unzipped a duffle bag and pulled out the video game system. She tapped the screen to get to the list of online players. She was so happy her family was still alive. Earlier, she was able to connect with Jose for an online chat. He told her after his father was killed Solana's father went berserk. He stabbed a guy who had a machine gun and then grabbed his gun. All that machine gun firing was actually her father. She had a hard time picturing her father doing that. It was like a scene from a war movie Jose told her. Then he told her that her grandmother, Marina was killed. It crushed Solana that her grandmother was gone but she was selfishly thrilled both her parents were still alive. Jose went on to tell her all the dogs and llamas were killed or ran off and disappeared. They managed to save the horses though. They searched Cusco for Solana but only found her horse and eventually made the hard

decision to leave Cusco assuming that she was dead. They traveled north avoiding large cities and they had just arrived at Lake Junín in Peru when Solana contacted them. They found a place near the lake to wait for Solana.

Solana saw only one username, wildfire626, on the list. She clicked on it and a message popped up, Where R U? Your Mom is nuts with worry.

Solana turned to ask Jayden, “How much longer until we get to the lake?”

Jayden looked at Shekinah and she looked down to read the map. “We should be there any minute now,” Shekinah told her. Solana stood up to look over the cab of the truck. Fields of dead grass stretched out in all directions with mountains in the distance. There was no sign of her family. She sat back down and typed her response. Watch for us. We’re almost there.

Just as she hit send, Shekinah shouted, “There! Is that them?”

Solana stood up again and looked out. The road dipped down into a large valley with mountains rising up on the other side. There was a cluster of small buildings to the left and a group of horses stood by them. She saw several people standing nearby. Her heart skipped a beat she was so excited to see her family again. “Yes, that has to be them!” Solana shouted with glee.

They pulled the truck up to the buildings and her family approached excitedly. Jayden and Shekinah got out of the truck and walked back next to Solana. The pumas stood up in the bed of the truck and watched Solana's

family cautiously. Her family stopped their approach as the male puma growled at them. Solana put her hands on both pumas to quiet and reassure them. “It's all right,” Solana said as she felt the pumas relax.

“You have pumas? That is so cool! Are they trained? Can I pet them?” Jose said excitedly as he tried to reach out and pet them. The male puma growled as Jose reached his hand out.

“I don’t think they’re ready for that Jose. They aren’t exactly trained but they seem to understand me. It’s a long story.”

Esperanza asked, “What are you doing with those pumas? And who are your friends?”

“This is Jayden and Shekinah. They saved my life along with the help of these pumas. They would like to come with us to the States,” Solana replied.

Esperanza said, “Nice to meet you Jayden, Shekinah. Please, come inside and you can tell us how you met and where you found the pumas.”

Marcos helped Solana out of the back of the truck. The pumas leaped out of the truck and looked at the horses. Solana carefully introduced the horses to the pumas so they understood the horses were not to be eaten, as they too were family. Luckily, they seemed to understand the concept of family even though they are solitary creatures in the wild. After the pumas realized they couldn’t eat the horses, they ran off to hunt. When everyone was done greeting Jayden and Shekinah they went inside to eat and share their stories. After eating, she laid down on a couch to listen to her family

and friends talk. Everyone listened intently to Jayden's story of how he saved Solana in Cusco. Although it was an exciting story, Solana could feel her eyes getting heavy. She felt safe and happy but she knew they still had a long journey ahead of them.

Esperanza gently shook Solana, “It's time to go, Solana.”

Solana sat up and noticed it was dark out. She looked at her mother puzzled.

“We travel at night because the cooler temperatures are easier on everyone,” Esperanza said.

Solana got up slowly and stretched. She wanted to stay there and rest but she knew they must move on. Solana followed her mother out of the house. Outside everyone was packing up the saddlebags on the horses. Solana checked her horse’s saddlebags and found her pink backpack with her baby’s things. She also found the book from lottery people. She was relieved they were not lost. She pulled out the crocheted baby blanket. It was striped in many colorful colors and felt so soft. Her grandmother must have worked very hard preparing it. She hugged the blanket close to her heart missing her grandmother.

The sound of her father, Marcos cussing caught her attention. He stood in front of the truck with the hood open. Jayden sat in the driver's seat attempting to get the motor to start. Suddenly, some sparks flared up from the battery and a puff of smoke billowed out from under the hood.

“Damn it! The fucking battery is fried,” Marcos shouted.

“Marcos!” Esperanza said.

“Sorry honey, I’m so tired of everything going wrong,” Marcos said and looked up to the sky, “Can't we get a break here!”

Solana glanced up at the sky and noticed there were no stars. It was going to be a dark cloudy night and it looked like she was going back to riding her horse again. After a short while, they managed to pack most of the stuff from the truck onto the horses. The rest was stuffed into backpacks. The cooler of meat had to stay behind but they did pack one saddlebag with ice and meat. Jayden rushed over to help Solana onto her horse, which Solana appreciated since it was getting very difficult at this point. Her belly was so large she thought for sure she would burst. Solana decided riding sidesaddle was the most comfortable position especially since she was still wearing the yellow chiffon dress. After helping her, Jayden turned to help Shekinah but Lukas had beaten him to the task. Solana rolled her eyes. Shekinah rode her grandmother's gray Criollo horse. She was the mildest horse they had. Shekinah looked scared on the horse since she had never ridden before.

“Don't worry Shekinah; she is such a sweet horse. She will follow the other horses. All you need to do is hang onto the saddle,” Solana reassured her.

“What’s her name?” Shekinah asked.

“Grey Star,” Solana replied.

Lukas and Jose were anxious to lead the way so they trotted their horses out in front with Irene and Esperanza followed directly behind them. Solana realized the pumas hadn’t come back from hunting yet. She thought about calling them but didn’t know how to call a puma. Here kitty, kitty just didn't seem appropriate. She decided she would give them names if they returned. She glanced behind her looking for the pumas and saw Shekinah and Jayden following behind her and Marcos.

Solana smiled at Shekinah, “You’re doing a great job with your horse.”

“Thanks, you’re right it’s not too hard after all.”

Solana looked past Shekinah but it was too dark to see anything . Shekinah instinctively looked behind her as well.

“I’m sure they will find you,” Shekinah said knowingly.

“Yeah, I hope you’re right.”

The road sloped downward heading into a dark valley surrounded by low distant mountains.

Solana turned to her father who rode next to her and asked, “What is our plan? We'll never make it there fast enough on horseback alone.”

After a minute of silence, Marcos answered, “We're not sure. Even if we find vehicles, I don't think we can get past the panama with all the flooding.”

“We should try to find a boat,” Solana replied.

Jose added, “How about we find an airplane and fly there.”

Solana smirked, “Oh sure, and who is going to fly the plane genius?”

Jose shouted angrily, “Shut up Solana! Do you have a better idea? I could be home with papa and now he's dead and it's all your fault!”

Irene intervened, “Jose, it's not true. We all decided to come on our own.”

Solana thought Irene sounded hollow. She had been so quiet since they left her house. Jose began to sob quietly and everyone stopped talking. Solana wished she hadn’t said that to Jose. She couldn't help but wonder if Jose was right. It was her fault she entered the lottery and now both her grandmother and uncle were dead. Solana felt a lump in her throat and tears welled up in her eyes. Then she thought of the poisonous gases slowly rising all around them. If they stayed and did nothing they would most likely end up dead anyway, so she pushed away the thought that any of their deaths was her fault. She has given them a chance to survive and a chance for her baby to grow up and live a normal life. They had to go on no matter what.

*** Section Break ***

The road leveled out and followed close to the edge of the water. A large lake spread out across the valley and blended in with the darkness. It was a hot, humid night with no breeze. Sweat dripped down Solana's back

confirming her family's decision to travel at night. Even during the night, the heat was suffocating especially at this slow speed. She wasn't sure if they could survive crossing the Earth's equator. She thought Jose's idea of flying would be great if there was only a way. Better yet, if only they could transport living things in transprinters, then they would already be there. She knew they were working on the technology but she didn't know if they ever finished. Throughout the world so many people died, she doubted that anyone would be working on anything except surviving. It was scary how fast the change happened. One minute she was living happily on her family's sunflower farm, and then it was gone. She really missed their farm. She used to ride her horse out to a large tree surrounded by miles of sunflowers. Then climb up to her favorite branch and eat a snack while she watched the sunset. Solana turned back to look at Shekinah and Jayden.

"What do you miss the most?" Solana asked them.

"What do you mean?" Shekinah asked.

"Before all this happened, when the world was beautiful and life was easy. I really miss the trees and the sound of their leaves swishing in the summer breeze. I took them for granted but now I realize how beautiful they really were," said Solana.

"You know what I miss? Watching a movie and eating popcorn," Shekinah said.

"I miss chocolate pie!" Jose chimed in.

“Oh sure, now I'm hungry for chocolate,” Solana said and smiled at Jose.

Esperanza added, “Well, I miss breathing in clean air with no sulfur smell.”

Jayden added,“I miss playing in a band with my friends.”

Lukas turned and asked Jayden, “You had a band? Man, that’s so cool! What instrument did you play?”

“I played lead guitar but sometimes I would play the drums too.”

“I’ve seen Jayden play for the king, he is really good,” Shekinah said admiringly.

“Thanks Shekinah. Sadly, Mohawk was jealous, busted my guitar, and told everyone it was an accident. Otherwise, I’d play something for you,” Jayden told her.

“Look, Solana,” Marcos said as he pointed behind them. “Your pet pumas have returned.”

Everyone turned to see the two pumas run up and slow to a walk when they were beside Sunflower Magic. Sunflower Magic side stepped nervously but Solana quickly calmed her. She heard the male puma begin to purr loudly. Solana smiled, “I need to name my friends since they seem to be a part of our family now.”

“How about Sun and Flower” Jose suggested.

“I don’t know, my horse is already named Sunflower that’s too confusing,” Solana replied.

“How about Tapac and Yauri?” Jayden said.

“Hmm, are you talking about that Inca legion about a golden staff? Was it something about creating the Temple of the Sun?” Solana asked.

“Yep, exactly,” Jayden replied.

“That’s a really cool idea,” Solana said as she smiled at Jayden.

“Solana likes Jayden,” Jose said in a singsong voice.

“Cut it out Jose!” Solana said as she turned red and Jose stuck his tongue out at her.

Did she like Jayden? He was incredibly cute and muscular. He seemed so smart and kind as well. Most good-looking guys were conceited but Jayden wasn’t like that. She thought he probably wouldn’t like her because she was pregnant. He seemed so upset about her pregnancy when they first met. She looked down at her large protruding belly and suddenly felt self-conscious and tried to straighten her dress over her belly. She thought her hair must be a mess and ran her fingers through her hair trying to work out some tangles. She fussed about her appearance until she noticed that the horses were splashing through shallow water. She looked forward and saw that the lake was flooded over the road. The pumas stayed out of the water and headed for the higher but rougher terrain of the mountains. The road rose back up out of the water a few hundred feet ahead of them. It looked quicker and easier to follow the flooded road, so they continued through the water and silently hoped it wouldn’t get too deep.

They were about half way across the water when Jose's horse stopped walking. Everyone stopped their horses and looked at Jose. The water was about four feet deep, which wasn't very deep for a horse. Jose nudged and encouraged his dapple-gray horse to continue.

"Come on boy, it's not far now. I know you don't like water," Jose said coaxing his horse with firm squeezes of his legs but his horse wouldn't move.

Jose jumped off his horse and into the water. He pulled the reins over the horse's head and pulled the reluctant horse. His horse stepped forward but still kept tension on the reins.

"Your horse wanted you to get wet too Jose," Lukas joked.

"Very funny! He just doesn't like water."

"Maybe I can help," Solana said as she realized she might be able to mind speak with his horse. She thought she would try it with her horse first. Solana reached down to touch Sunflower Magic. She felt fear in her horse. Solana looked up scared.

"Wait, something's wrong!" Solana shouted.

There was a large splash and Jose was gone. His horse ran back toward the dry road in a panic.

"No!" Irene screamed and jumped off her horse and pushed her way through the water toward the spot where Jose was.

There was a loud whinny from behind them as Jose's horse fell into the water. Marcos ignored the horse as he directed his horse up to the area

where Jose disappeared, jumped off his horse and began diving into the water to search for Jose. Irene screamed hysterically, “Jose! Help me save my baby!”

Jayden and Lukas got off their horses, half waded, and half swam over to help search.

Marcos came up out of the water, “It's too dark, I can't find him.”

Solana was getting ready to slide off her horse when she saw a large crocodile snout in the water right next to her Aunt. Solana opened her mouth to say watch out but it happened too fast. Her Aunt Irene was gone before she could even get a sound out.

“Crocodiles!” Solana screamed.

Lukas and Jayden rushed back toward their spooked horses. Lukas quickly climbed back onto his horse. Jayden tripped and splashed into the water right next to Solana’s horse. Solana watched in horror as she clung to her prancing horse fearing a crocodile would snatch him away. Jayden popped back up out of the water with fear in his eyes as he tried to push faster through the water toward his horse. Solana realized she was holding her breath as she watched him and the waters all around. Then a crocodile shot up out of the water and clamped down on the hindquarters of Jayden’s horse. It was a massive crocodile and used its weight to drag the horse down into the water. Irene’s horse bucked, whinnied and ran off towards the other side of the lake and disappeared into the darkness. Another crocodile shot up at Shekinah’s leg, but she jerked her leg back and fell off

her horse away from the crocodile. Jayden saw her falling toward him and he turned just in time to catch her. Shekinah's horse bucked and kicked wildly. Solana quickly backed up Sunflower next to Shekinah's horse and grabbed the reins to steady her. As soon as the horse stopped bucking, Jayden lifted Shekinah onto the horse and then climbed onto the horse behind her.

A group of crocodiles was feasting on Jayden's horse behind them so they slowly shifted away from the thrashing in the water. Other crocodiles swam circles around them forcing the horses closer together. Marcos and Lukas got out their guns and started firing. However, the crocodiles hid under the water then rose back up again. One suddenly lunged at Sunflower Magic, but Sunflower kicked the crocodile knocking it away. Solana managed to hang on tightly. She was so scared; she didn't want to die now after they had gone so far. There seemed to be no way out. Some of the crocodiles lurked near Sunflower and waited for the right moment to strike. Further out in the lake, Solana saw several more wakes of rippling water headed their way.

Marcos said, "I'm going to head out into deeper water and let them chase me, the rest of you make a run for dry land."

"What? No Papa, no!" Solana begged as a light rain began to fall.

"It's the only way Solana, I love you." Marcos said.

Marcos looked at Esperanza and moved his horse next to hers. They leaned in to kiss and hold their foreheads together for a moment. Everyone

watched them but Solana couldn't stand the thought of her father leaving and had to look away. There had to be another way. The rain picked up and it felt hot to Solana. Then she noticed the crocodiles disappeared. She looked around but there was no sign of them.

"They're gone. Wait Papa, I don't see them anymore."

Everyone looked around. The water was still except for the ripples caused by the rain. The rain was so hot it felt like it was burning. Solana glanced at her arms and saw red splotches.

"This rain hurts. It's burning me." Solana complained.

"Me too! The rain is boiling hot," Jose agreed and tried to pull his shirt over his head to block the rain.

"Come on, follow me. I see a building up ahead," Solana said as she urged Sunflower forward.

Her horse took off and the other horses immediately followed. Solana wished she could reach into the saddlebags to get a blanket to hide under. The rain hurt so much. How could it be so hot! It felt like it was boiling but that was impossible. The building seemed so far away but at least there were no sign of the crocodiles.

They reached the building and Solana slid off her horse and pulled open the door. The building was made of sheet metal and looked like a warehouse. As soon as Solana opened the door, Sunflower trotted inside. The rest of the group rode their horses into the building. As Right before

Solana shut the door, the two pumas ran inside. She took one last look for the others but there was no sign of anyone.

“We need to get the rain off our skin,” Esperanza told everyone as she opened up a saddlebag and pulled out some towels and handed them out.

Everyone had red splotches all over their bodies. Tapac the male puma was sitting next to Solana on the dusty cement floor licking his fur furiously. Rain dripped through holes in the metal roof and nearly landed on Shekinah. She quickly moved away from the dripping water. Solana noticed there were several more leaks in the roof and everyone, including the horses was doing their best to avoid the rainwater. Suddenly, Lukas headed for the warehouse door.

“They are still out there! I have to find them,” Lukas screamed. Esperanza and Marcos stopped him from leaving. After a short struggle, Lukas quit and wailed loudly. Esperanza held him tightly trying to calm him down. Slowly, Esperanza sat down with Lukas and gently rocked him in her arms. Marcos sat nearby whispering that everything was going to be OK, that he was going to be OK. The pain of Lukas made Solana realize what had just happened, they lost Jose and Irene. Gone. Solana felt numb with sadness but the tears did not come. It was as if this whole thing was one long bad dream. It couldn’t be real. She didn’t know what to do but watching Lukas sob was not helping. Solana decided to take care of Sunflower and the other horses to keep her mind busy. She removed their saddles and rubbed them down with a towel. Shekinah and Jayden helped

Solana.

Shekinah asked, “Why was rain so hot? It felt like it was hot enough to boil.”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t make sense,” Solana said.

Esperanza replied, “Maybe it some type of extreme acid rain?”

Everyone looked up with trepidation at the metal roof and watched the drips accumulate and fall. There seemed to be no end to the nightmares this world had to offer now. Solana felt fearful and decided to look away. The roof will be fine she told herself. She hoped the rain will quit soon. She had to get everyone to calm down. She continued to rub down Sunflower and asked, “Do you think it will be nice where we’re going?”

“I bet it’s a dome community,” Jayden said after no one replied.

Shekinah said smiling at Jayden, “I was picturing a dome too. A dome with a city and farmlands.”

“Maybe Teal Haven is teal colored,” Solana said.

Shekinah replied, “I wonder if the dome is teal colored.”

“Or maybe there is a teal-colored lake,” Solana added.

Shekinah smiled and said, “I’m going to live in the city by the lake. I can picture Jayden playing his guitar by a fire on the beach.”

Jayden smiled at Shekinah and said,“Yeah, maybe I’ll start up my own band.”

Solana noticed the way Jayden was smiling at Shekinah and felt a twinge of jealously. Shekinah was such a cute girl with her big brown eyes

and pretty smile. And she wasn't pregnant. Of course, he would choose her. Solana suddenly felt sad that she might never find a partner.

Lukas joined in with a harsh voice, "Can I join your band Jayden?"

"Sure, can you play an instrument?" Jayden replied.

"I had a drum set I used to play all the time until things changed." Lukas said sounding calmer.

Solana wasn't interested in talk about a band. She imagined her future home. What if it was an underground home she asked herself? Humans could end up pale and sickly almost never coming to the surface to see the sun.

"Sounds like I have my drummer and the beginnings of a new band," Jayden said interrupting Solana's thoughts.

"How much longer do you think it will take to get there?" Shekinah asked.

Marcos answered, "I think that depends on whether or not we find a boat. Maybe another week or two?"

"I hope it doesn't take two more weeks. We don't have that much time. What day is it? I keep losing track of the days," Solana said feeling somewhat foolish.

"It's August 3rd," a strange man answered as he stepped out from behind some boxes near the back of the warehouse.

Everyone stared at him in surprise. He had an Irish accent and was maybe in his 40s with brown shaggy hair and a beard. He wore a tattered

bucket hat and a makeshift raincoat out of a tarp. There was a moment of silence before the man said, “Forgive me, my name is Shane. I mean you no harm. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but you can’t be too careful these days and I wasn’t sure I could trust you folks.”

Marcos walked up to him and extended his hand in greeting, “Marcos.” After shaking hands, Marcos introduced him to everyone else.

“I couldn’t help but overhear, are you travelling to a dome community?” Shane asked and continued without waiting for an answer. “Perhaps we can help each other. I have a yacht nearby that we could all use if you will take me with you.”

“Oh, thank God! That is exactly what we need. But…” Lukas hesitated and looked over Shane suspiciously.

“Don’t worry you can trust me, besides it seems like you travel with impressive security,” Shane said as he gestured towards the pumas.

Marcos said before Lukas could say anything else, “Please, allow my family to discuss this in private.”

“Of course,” Shane replied and walked to the back of the warehouse.

Everyone else gathered in a huddle on the opposite side of the warehouse as they carefully avoided the rain leaking through the roof.

Solana started the conversation, “I think we can trust him and we really need a boat.”

Marcos added quietly, “I agree with you Solana, but we need to be careful.”

Esperanza whispered, “There are many of us, and he seems polite. If things go wrong, we can deal with him as we go. I say we accept his offer.”

Lukas blurted, “Please, can we? I really want to get out of here!”

Marcos let out a deep sigh and looked at Jayden who only shrugged. Then everyone looked at Shekinah which prompted her to add, “I’m with you guys, whatever decision you make.”

Marcos nodded and turned to the back of the warehouse, “We have decided to take you with us, Shane.”

“Thank you, you won’t regret it!” Shane replied as he smiled.

*** Section Break ***

The next morning the rain had stopped so everyone followed Shane. They made sure to keep clear of Lake Junín. Just like Shane had said, it wasn’t far and after a couple of hours, they arrived at a tunnel made of a wooden frame covered with duct-taped tarps. The tunnel led down the side of a steep hill to a wide river at the bottom of a deep valley.

Shane said as he gestured at the tunnel, “It took me so long to build this tunnel but I didn’t have a choice since I couldn’t find a gas mask. It’s a good thing I was able to finish it before the hydrogen sulfide got too strong,

not that it didn’t make me sick while I was building it. I think it would kill me if I tried to go into that valley now.”

Shane led the way into the tunnel. Everyone walked in single file while they led their horses into the tunnel. The pumas stayed close to Solana. When they reached the river, Solana was surprised that Shane’s boat was a large speed yacht. It was covered in multiple layers of duct-taped tarps.

“Here she is, Lady Ann,” Shane said looking at the yacht.

“Wow, she looks fast!” said Lukas.

“She is fast, top speed of 45 knots. One of the fastest in her class and she’s a real beauty under all those tarps. I boarded up most of the windows because I wasn’t sure what kind of trouble I’d run into. I didn’t want the windows breaking and letting in the poison. As you can see, I’ve been working for a while to get her ready so I could return home. Then it dawned on me the whole world was like this and there was no reason to go anywhere. Yet I didn’t want to give up so I kept collecting food and useful things to keep me busy. Then you guys came along and now there is a place where we can go.”

“Where are you from?” Solana asked.

“I’m from Ireland but I haven’t been there in years. I’m a marine biologist so I’ve spent most of my adult life studying different parts of the ocean. That is what I was doing here in Peru.” Shane paused and looked at

the horses before saying, “We’ll need to make room for the horses before we bring them aboard.”

They tied the horses to the tunnel frame and Shane led the way across a wooden ramp into the yacht. Solana was glad the ramp looked strong enough for the horses to use so it shouldn’t take them long to leave for America. The yacht was large and she thought it used to be luxurious. All the cabinets and furniture were trimmed with polished wood and the rest she assumed used to be all white. There were piles of canned food and boxes of various supplies. The white cabinets were dingy and worn. Mud was tracked across the once white floor. Shane saw her looking at all the mud.

“I’m sorry I didn’t clean the place up a bit. Here would you like to sit down?” Shane said quickly moving a box of tools to the floor to make a space on the couch.

Solana sat down grateful to rest a moment. The pumas had followed her onto the yacht and sat down on the floor near her.

“Are those puma’s your pets?” Shane asked.

“Yes, but they aren’t very tame so I wouldn’t get too close,” Solana said grateful to have them with her.

Solana saw that Shane looked at her belly but to her relief he didn’t say anything about it. Just then, Esperanza and Marcos came into the main room and looked around.

“Looks like we can make enough room for the horses in here,” Esperanza said and then looked at Shane. “Do you mind if I start moving things?”

“No, not at all,” Shane said. “I think I know where I can get some bales of hay for the horses. I shouldn’t be gone too long.”

“How about I come with you and help?” Marcos asked.

“Yeah, that would be great,” Shane replied.

Jayden decided to go with the men while the rest of them made room for the horses. Soon they had enough room for all five of their remaining horses. A few hours later, the men returned, loaded, and stacked the hay in the yacht. Then they brought the horses into the yacht and took off their saddlebags and saddles. While Solana brushed her horse, she noticed an empty dry bag in one of the boxes near her horse. She had an idea, and pulled the bag out of the box. It was a large dry bag made to seal watertight. Solana went through the saddlebags and found the seeds she gathered in Machu Picchu. She put them in the dry bag. “There that should protect the seeds if we run into more rain on the way to Colorado,” Solana said aloud to no one in particular. And she thought since there was plenty of room she might as well keep the rest of her things dry. She stuffed her pink backpack, lottery book and moon shoes into the bag. Then she sealed it tight and set it on the floor near her saddle.

The men managed to kill two crocodiles that they found resting near the shore of Lake Junín and planned to use most of the meat to feed the

pumas. They left the crocodiles up on the hilltop to butcher. Everyone went back up to the hilltop to help. They skinned them and cut up the meat. Jayden and Shekinah helped wrap the meat in paper because they didn't have the stomach for butchering.

"Shane, you said you are a marine biologist?" Solana asked while she cut chunks of meat.

"Yes, that's right. I fell in love with the sea when I was a wee child."

"Do you know why hydrogen sulfide is coming out of the ocean?" Solana asked.

"Well, I believe it's an oceanic anoxic event where euxinia developed. It has been known to be triggered by excess CO_2 in the atmosphere usually from extreme volcanism."

"Huh? Wait what is euxinia?"

Smiling Shane replied, "Sorry, let me try to put it another way. When you add a lot of greenhouse gases in the air, it warms the planet. This also causes more rain and nutrients to pour into the ocean, which then causes huge blooms of plankton. The plankton consume the available oxygen in the water. Also, the warmer ocean causes the circulation to slow and eventually stop. Together you end up with an ocean that has no oxygen. The hydrogen sulfide comes from deep-ocean bacteria that doesn't need oxygen to survive."

"Wait, this kind of thing happened before?" Solana asked.

"Yes, it's the reason for the largest extinction events on Earth."

“But, that means not everything died and eventually goes back to normal, right?”

“That’s true; nature seems to have a way of balancing itself.”

“So all we have to do is wait this out in a dome or cave or whatever and eventually everything will be good again, right?”

“Sort of, the ocean will likely spew out poisonous gases for the next 500,000 years before it returns to an ocean with oxygen. Also, when this event happened during the Permian extinction event it took life around ten million years to recover to a healthy diversity.”

“Ten million years? That’s so long,” Solana said feeling stunned. How could the human race survive for that long even with a dome?

“I know, Solana. It does seem hopeless. With so many of us dead and most of our technology lost, I’m not sure living in a dome is going to work.”

Lukas added, “They never said it was a dome.”

Solana replied, “True, they just said it was a safe place to live called Teal Haven.”

“Who told you about this safe place?” Shane asked.

Solana told Shane about the lottery and even some of her journey getting there. She left out some parts like the book, actual location and the hidden key in her thumb. She didn’t trust Shane that much.

After all the work was done, it was late in the day and everyone headed back into the yacht. Esperanza had taken a large chunk of crocodile

meat to the yacht and roasted it for their dinner. She liked the crocodile meat although she thought it tasted odd like fish-flavored pork.

After dinner, they prepared to launch the yacht, which it seemed to Solana only involved a few things like starting the engine and untying the yacht. Shane did one last systems check and then they were heading down river towards the Pacific Ocean. Solana was excited about being on the yacht so she sat next to Shane in the bridge as he drove the yacht down the river. Finally, they were leaving South America and making real progress towards the States. As they left the river and entered the ocean, she noticed it was purple.

"Why is it–" Solana started to ask.

"Purple?" Shane finished. "It's a bloom of purple sulfur bacteria. It can only live in anoxic waters and feeds on hydrogen sulfide."

Solana sat quietly and stared out at the purple ocean and the setting sun. It was a strange yet beautiful purple and orange scene. The rocking of the waves was made her sleepy and her eyelids were heavy. She thought about finding a place to sleep.

"When is your baby due?" Shane asked.

"I'm due August 24th."

"Wow, that's um exciting," Shane said as he looked down at her belly. "Do you mind if I ask what your plan is to deliver the baby?"

"My grandmother and mom were going to help but my grandmother didn't make it."

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Solana noticed there was something in the water and leaned closer to the window. Shane did the same. They saw blobs floating all around them. Solana thought it looked like jellyfish but there were so many. They were floating close together and seemed to spread out away from the yacht as far as she could see.

“What are all of those? Jellyfish?” Solana asked.

“Yes, that’s what they look like. Interesting. I knew they can thrive in oxygen depleted water but there is a lot more than I would have expected.”

“Are we safe? They can’t hurt us, right?”

“No, we’re fine as long as we don’t go swimming,” Shane chuckled at the thought.

Solana sighed, “That’s good. I’m really tired. I’m going to bed now. Nice talking to you Shane.”

Chapter 13

After two weeks of preparations, they were finally on their way. He never imagined everyone would take so long to prepare and pack their belongings. Although he wasn't in a hurry to leave his home once the decision was made he just wanted to get it over with. He loved living in Switzerland and he would miss everything about it. His father told him they needed to be at the destination by August 12th because that was only a meeting location. They kept the final location of the dome a secret. That gave them four days to get there so they still arrive early. Please don't let it be some sports dome converted into a home Skylar felt depressed about the thought. They should have stayed in Switzerland and waited for things to get back to normal. He looked out the small jet window and watched the puffs of clouds pass beneath him. The ocean far below seemed endless. It was endless, like this day he thought. It had been nearly eleven hours since they left Switzerland and the sun still had not set. He was so exhausted but he couldn't sleep with the sun shining into the jet so brightly. He tried closing the blinds but Roth Herman's blonde wife insisted she needed the blinds open because she was claustrophobic. Skylar could not remember her name and did not really care. She did nothing but complain since he met her. She was clearly unhappy about leaving Switzerland, which he couldn't blame her but her complaining was getting on his nerves. He tried

to find a seat as far away from her as he could but she still annoyed him as she sat filing her nails for the longest time. Then she stunk up the entire jet with the fumes of her nail polish. Skylar glanced at Roth Herman's wife and saw she was sewing something that looked like a blue dress. At least she was finally finished doing her nails.

He thought about his friend, Porter. France was so badly flooded and damaged they couldn't even find a place to land. At least that is what his father told him. They could have at least tried to land in a field. He hated that he might never see his friend again, which didn't help his mood. Porter was probably dead like so many people he used to know. Skylar realized he was feeling depressed and cranky. He saw how sadness could change people and made them give up on life. The sadness made them weak and susceptible to dying from one of many new viruses that developed out of nowhere. He wasn't going to end up like that so he tried to cheer himself up with positive thoughts of Porter. Porter can take care of himself he told himself. He always was a tough bastard.

He glanced at the men in the cabin with him. Walter appeared to be sleeping with the chair tilted back and a cowboy hat covering his face. Walter was a retired soldier, an old grey-haired friend of his father's. He spent most of his time alone constructing wooden furniture to sell to the tourists. Next to Walter was Joe, an African American. Joe had lived in Switzerland for as long as Skylar could remember but he still had an American accent. Joe nodded his head as he listened to Roth speak. Roth

was the owner of the adventure company that hired Skylar. Joe also worked for Roth. Joe handled the finances and marketing among many things. It was a small company so everyone did the work of several people. Skylar couldn’t hear what Roth was saying over the noise of the jet engine. Roth had dark brown hair and was clean-shaven except for a bushy mustache. The mustache curved around the outside of his lips and down to the bottom edge of his chin.

Skylar rarely got to work with Roth as he always took the high-paying clients on wild expeditions. However, one summer, Roth invited Skylar go on an expedition with him. A new client, an American named Adam, wanted to test and hone his outdoor survivor skills and needed a local guide to go with him. Adam preferred Roth since he had a reputation for being an expert in wilderness survival. Adam wanted a realistic survival test and asked for a two-person minimum supply expedition. Roth told Adam no because it was too dangerous however, Adam kept increasing the amount of money he was willing to pay and insisted he was a skilled outdoorsman. Reluctantly, Roth agreed on the condition that Skylar came along to help. Adam agreed as long as the boy stayed out of his way.

The three of them headed out into the mountain wilderness for a month-long expedition with only a few survival tools, a first aid kit, some clothes, and one week’s supply of emergency food. The trip went well at first and Adam even impressed Roth with some of his skills. Then the rain began and didn’t quit for days.

One night, they were huddled together, lightly dozing on a bed of logs and grass. The rain dripped through the layers of pine and leaves that were used to create the roof of their shelter. The wind had picked up adding to the chill factor. Skylar was dressed for much colder temperatures as Roth had insisted he packed clothes for the worst possible weather. Skylar glanced over at Adam who shivered next to him. Adam didn't listen to Roth's advice as he insisted he was never cold. Skylar thought he looked like Grizzly Adams from the old American stories. After a while, Adam stopped shivering and Skylar was able to drift into a deep sleep.

Adam jerked, which woke Skylar. Skylar opened his eyes to see Adam jump up and rip off his shirt.

"I'm burning up!" Adam said loudly with a slur as he got up, took off his shirt and threw it onto the ground. Suddenly he took off running, stumbled, tripped, got up and continued running, bouncing off a tree trunk as he disappeared into the dark forest.

Skylar looked at Roth thinking the man had lost his mind.

"We better go catch him," Roth said groaning as he got up and headed after him.

They found him at the bottom of a twenty-foot cliff. He had broken both his legs. When they tried to help, Adam fought them like a wild animal stuck in a trap. Roth had to punch him unconscious. Roth explained that Adam has severe hypothermia. They wrapped him in an emergency heat

blanket and put splints on his legs. Then they built a new shelter over and around Adam.

As they waited for Adam to recover, Roth gestured at Adam and asked, “Would you trust your life in the hands of this guy?” Roth paused, put one hand on Skylar’s shoulder and cupped his other hand in front of Skylar as if holding an invisible ball, “Out in the wilderness, in whose hands is your life? That is why I wanted you here.”

The rain stopped and the clouds blew away as the sun slowly rose. Adam awoke coherent enough that Roth convinced him to drink a warm medicated tea. While Adam rested, and sipped the tea, Roth taught Skylar how to build a stretcher. By morning the next day, Adam was well enough to be moved, so they carefully moved him onto the stretcher. Skylar and Roth carried Adam out of the wilderness, saving his life.

Skylar was relieved Roth had decided to come with them because Roth was the one person he trusted enough to put his life in his hands.

Erik, who sat next to Roth, listened and occasionally joined in on the conversation. Erik also worked for the company as a photographer and cook for group expeditions. Erik had short reddish-blonde hair and looked to be in his thirties. Skylar thought all the men at the table looked about the same age. Skylar glanced at Ken who was sitting a few seats behind him. He was mostly a stranger to Skylar. Skylar thought Ken looked like an American with mostly grey hair peppered with black. Ken just stared out the window. Ken noticed Skylar looking at him and smiled.

“We should be there by now, don’t you think?” Ken asked.

“Yeah, I was thinking that too but I still don’t see any land. Could it all be flooded?” Skylar asked Ken.

Ken chuckled, “No, not the entire United States! Some of New York City might be flooded.”

“You’re American, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m from New York.”

“New York City?” Skylar asked.

“No, I’m not from the city. I used to live in the Finger Lakes region, near Seneca Lake. Have you ever heard about the area?” Ken said.

“No, is it nice?” Skylar asked.

“It’s beautiful! I really miss it. I used to work for a winery on the lake. I would get to meet so many interesting people there. Every day was like a new adventure.”

“Why did you leave?” Skylar asked thinking Ken’s light blue eyes seemed filled with sadness.

“I took my wife on vacation to Switzerland and that is when the changes to the world started. It happened so fast and then my wife became sick. I buried her in Interlaken. I couldn’t get myself to leave her so I stayed. When Lorenz told me about his plans to go to the States, I decided it was time to go home,” Ken said and glanced out the window again. “Look, there’s the Statue of Liberty!”

Skylar looked out the window and at the Statue of Liberty. The left half of her body was stripped of her copper clothing which exposed her inner skeletal frame. The torch remained in her right hand proudly held high, as if nothing was wrong. As the jet flew by, Skylar saw that the waves splashed up onto her sandals.

“My God, the water is high!” Ken said as he stared out the jet window.

Joe sounded distressed as he added, “Look at her crown, one of the spikes is broken. That’s not a good sign.”

Skylar glanced at Joe and realized everyone except Walter was up and looked out the windows on his side of the jet.

Erik asked, “Who cares if a spike is broken?”

Roth added, “Aren’t the spikes supposed to symbolize the seven seas?”

“I thought they symbolized the seven continents,” Evaline, Roth’s wife said.

Joe replied, “No, they really stand for the seven angels.”

“Seven angels? What are you talking about?” Skylar asked but immediately wished he had not. He braced himself for another one of Joe’s long religious talks.

“The seven angels from the Book of Revelation. You really ought to read the bible some time. It’s the only way you’re going to survive,” Joe said.

“That’s a load of crap!” Walter grumbled with his rough voice as he sat up in his chair. “My rifle is the reason I have survived this long so spare us your religious mumbo, jumbo.”

“Suit yourself,” Joe said and looked away.

Skylar looked out the window at the statue and the surrounding city buildings. Only the tallest buildings rose out of the ocean below. They looked damaged and wind torn. The windows were gone and some of the buildings were stripped down to metal beams with very little left of their walls and ceilings.

Lorenz walked in from the cockpit and announced, “JFK airport is completely flooded. It appears most of the surrounding airports will also be flooded. We’re rerouting to Westchester Airport. It won’t be long before we land. After that, Carl and I will concentrate on refueling the jet. Walter, I need your help as well. Roth, take Erik and Joe with you and try to find some more weapons and ammo. Ken, take my son with you and try to find some more food. He is good with a rifle, in case you run into trouble. Evaline, you can stay in the jet if you like.”

“Thank you, Lorenz, I would like that,” Evaline replied.

Everyone else agreed with nods. Lorenz turned and headed back to the cockpit. Soon after his father left, Skylar heard the jet engines wind down and he looked out the window to see land at last. The buildings below zipped past his view. He couldn’t see any signs of life. Abandoned cars were

left to rust in the middle of roadways. Nothing moved. Another dead town he thought.

“Can we breathe the air?” Skylar asked no one in particular.

“Not likely,” said Roth.

Skylar started to worry about the things he saw in Interlaken. Would the cows and locusts be here too? No, it was probably just a freak thing. Anyway, he would have his rifle this time.

They landed and slowly taxied over to the airport buildings before finally coming to a stop. Everyone got up and started getting their gas masks on and readying their weapons. Except Evaline who seemed content to continue her work on her blue dress as if it was the most important thing in the world.

“Hold up, everyone,” Lorenz said. "It does not look good. Carl said it looks like all the fuel tanks are damaged from a fire.”

Skylar took off his mask and looked out the window. He saw that large portions of the buildings were blackened and missing. He was surprised he hadn’t noticed it before. Although the front of the building next to them looked largely intact, as he looked around he saw that it was one of the few buildings left standing.

Lorenz said, “Carl and I are going to go out and check if there is anything left in the holding tanks. Evaline you’ll have to put on your mask so we can open the main door.”

Evaline reluctantly pulled on her gas mask. Lorenz grabbed his rifle, opened up the door and stepped out. Carl, the blond-haired pilot followed behind him holding his rifle. Everyone sat in their gas masks and watched out the windows. After a few minutes, they came back in and shut the door. They went back into the cockpit and pressurized the cabin.

Lorenz came back out of the cabin and took off his mask, “We are going to try Stewart International Airport.”

*** Section Break ***

Skylar took off his mask and sat back in his chair. He was so anxious to get out of the jet. Although it didn’t take long before they were lifted off, he could hardly stand to be cooped up for another second. He needed to get out and stretch. At the next airport, he would insist on getting out. Even if there is no fuel, he was getting out of this jet. He glanced at the others and saw they all looked equally upset. Everyone was so excited to finally be doing something only to have to wait again. Everyone sat in a depressed silence until the jet’s wheels once again touched down at the next airport.

Following his father, Skylar was the second person of out the jet. Ken followed close behind Skylar. Skylar looked around and saw a door to the main terminal. He pointed at it and Ken nodded. Skylar noticed the sun was

finally setting behind the terminal as he climbed a flight of stairs and opened the door into the terminal. They walked in and saw that they were in an airport gate. The sign told them they were in gate four.

“Look,” Ken said pointing and walking past Skylar.

Ken headed for the small café. Skylar followed him.

“I wonder if there’s any soda?” Ken said, “I have been dying for a soda. I haven’t had one in so long.”

Skylar replied, “Not exactly the best survival food but it does sound good.”

They went behind the counter and into the kitchen. Skylar opened a refrigerator but it was empty.

“Nothing in here,” Skylar said.

“Looks like someone already cleaned this place out,” Ken said as he pushed empty boxes off the storage shelves. “Damn! I thought I had a chance of finding at least one soda.”

“You give up too fast! There has to be some vending machines in this airport. Let’s look around.”

They walked down the main aisle of the airport and found nothing but empty gates.

“Let’s go to the lower level,” Skylar said as he headed for the escalator.

Skylar skipped several steps as he bounded down the broken escalator.

“Slow down Skippy,” Ken shouted.

Skylar turned around and realized he had left Ken at the top of the escalator. He was supposed to be watching his back.

“Sorry,” Skylar said and waited for Ken to catch up.

As they explored the first floor of the airport, they saw different car rental agencies and the baggage claim area with an ATM machine in the center of the room.

“Need any money?” Ken asked.

“Sure,” Skylar said sarcastically.

Near the ATM machine, they saw a sign reading, Starway – Coffee and Subs. They glanced at each other and walked that way. A loud bang noise from outside made them jump.

“What was that?” Ken asked surprised.

“It sounded like a gunshot,” Skylar replied looking concerned.

Another series of shots were fired. Skylar and Ken turned and ran for the escalator. They both dashed up the escalator and headed for the windows at gate 4. Outside there was a thick fog and a dim murky light from the setting sun.

“Where the hell did all this fog come from?” Ken asked.

“Look,” Skylar pointed at two shadows moving quickly through the fog and headed towards the jet.

The shadows stopped when another large shape moved towards them. Gunfire from the two shadows lit up the fog. The large shape dropped and didn't move.

"We better get out there and help," Skylar said as he opened the door leading outside.

They stepped out into the fog and climbed down the stairs. Skylar couldn't see anyone but he could make out the shape of the jet. They headed towards the jet.

"Hey! Anyone out there?" Ken shouted.

A strange "Mooargggg," sound came from deep in the fog.

Ken and Skylar stopped and turned toward the sound but they didn't see anything.

"Shhhh!" Skylar said to Ken as he backed away.

"Moooaaarggle," the sound moved closer.

Now they saw the large shape that moved towards them. Skylar lifted his rifle and aimed it at the shape, which moved with surprising speed. They saw the large gaping mouth and long fangs as the creature materialized out of the fog. It had the body of a cow with the mouth and nostrils like a grizzly bear. It had a scaly yellow skin with splotchy red markings. There were large bony spikes protruding up along its back. Its blood red eyes stared with hunger straight at Skylar. Skylar pulled the trigger of his rifle to open fire. To Skylar's horror, the bullets did not seem to penetrate its thick, bumpy skin. The gun clicked as he shot his last bullet. He had no time to

reload but Ken still fired his rifle close by his side. Skylar was about to turn and run when the beast stumbled and fell. They had to jump to the side to avoid the creature as it fell. They stood and waited to see if it would move.

“What is that?” Ken asked.

“I don’t know but I saw something like it in Interlaken,” Skylar said.

Ken kicked it but it didn’t move. Ken and Skylar looked up when they heard another noise. The cold grip of fear washed over Skylar as he saw a wall of dark shadows that moved towards them. He grabbed more ammo out of his pocket to reload his gun. The shadows were close and moved fast. He backed up and felt a tug on his shirt. Ken was crouched down behind the dead creature and he motioned for the jet. Skylar crouched down and followed Ken as they quietly made their way to the jet. Skylar looked back at the dead creature. Several of the creatures ran up to it and ripped off chunks of meat and to eat. One of them bucked and kicked the others to crowd in for some of the meat. Skylar lost his balance and caught himself with his hand that was held the bullets. The bullets clanked on the cement and at once, the creatures looked up at Ken and Skylar.

“Moooaaarrrrgg!!” the creatures bellowed at them.

Ken and Skylar got up and ran as the creatures charged at them. Roth stepped out from behind the jet and fired his weapon. Ken and Skylar ran past Roth and up the stairs into the jet. Roth followed them up the stairs while he shot his gun. They quickly shut the door as the creatures slammed into the jet. Carl had the engines of the jet running so the air would clear as

soon as they shut the door. Skylar took off his mask as he looked out the window at the creatures. He saw the herd run beside the jet and some of them slammed into the jet as they ran past. Carl started to slowly move the jet but it wasn't fast enough and the jet was battered by the creatures. One large creature hit the left wing and cracked it. Then it reared up on its hind legs and it put its front hooves onto the wing which leaned the jet to the left. The wing snapped off as the beast trampled over it. The jet wheels broke off and the bottom of the jet slammed down onto the pavement. Evaline screamed and Carl ran back into the cabin to see what was happening. Roth went to his wife and tried to calm her down.

The herd continued to run past and bang into the jet. Skylar thought the herd would never end but eventually the creatures disappeared into the fog. Evaline finally stopped screaming but continued to sob in Roth's arms.

"Where is Erik?" Ken asked.

Roth shook his head, "He didn't make it."

"What do you mean he didn't make it?" Skylar asked not wanting to believe Erik was dead.

Roth replied, "We were looking for weapons in the military hangars and one of those damn … things …"

Joe continued for Roth,"Those things…creatures straight from hell that's what they are!"

Carl replied, "Well they look like mutated cattle to me. Somehow, they have adapted to survive in the hydrogen sulfide atmosphere."

Lorenz added, “It seems those brimstone cattle have changed their diet from grass to meat.”

“It’s true,” said Roth. “When we came out of a military hangar, one of those… brimstone bulls with long red spikes on his back was waiting for us. It slammed into me and knocked me back several feet. Then it turned and grabbed Erik by the neck and started shaking him around like a dog shakes a toy. I couldn’t get a good shot in.”

Joe started to cry but then got his emotions under control to add,“I was standing right next to Erik. It could have grabbed me just as easy. I pulled up my rifle as quick as I could and shot it in its devil-red eyes. It dropped like a rock but it was too late for Erik. Oh Jesus! It nearly tore his head off!”

Roth walked over and patted Joe on the back, “You did the best anyone could have done.”

“What are we going to do now?” Evaline asked as she blew her nose.

Skylar glanced out of the windows but he couldn’t see anything but a grey blackness.

“Can we fix the jet?” Skylar asked.

“What do you think, Walter?” Carl asked.

“Are you kidding? No, the damage to the wing is beyond my ability to fix,” Walter said.

Lorenz asked,“Did anyone happen to see another jet we could use?”

Skylar answered his father, “No, Ken and I didn’t see anything but we didn’t get a chance to look around much.”

Joe asked, “Where are we going again, Wyoming? I saw an Army transport truck in one of the hangars. Can we drive there?”

“It’s Colorado. We’re going to Colorado,” Lorenz said.

Evaline said sternly, “No way am I going all the way to Colorado in some beat up Army truck!”

“We might not have a choice, princess,” Carl retorted.

Evaline shouted angrily, “That’s right I am. Royalty runs in my family and I can’t believe I let Roth convince me that I’d be safe with you people!”

Carl replied, “Oh, I’m so sorry your highness. How about you stay in this f-in jet and pamper your royal ass!”

“Hey, don’t talk to my wife like that!” Roth snapped.

“Stop it!” Lorenz said, “It has been a long flight and I know we’re all tired. We cannot do anything in this fog anyway. Tomorrow morning if the fog has cleared, we can see what our options are and figure out what to do then. For now, let’s get something to eat and rest.”

“I’m sorry. I am tired; it really was a long flight,” Carl said.

Roth replied, “It’s all right. It’s just, losing Erik…that hurt. He was a good friend.”

“I’m sorry about your friend,” Carl said as he headed for the cockpit to shut down the engines.

Skylar sat down and rested his head on the back of the softly cushioned chair. He closed his eyes. He was so exhausted he didn’t even feel like eating. He just wanted to sleep.

Chapter 14

Skylar watched out the helicopter window as they approached another airport. Much to Evaline's dismay the only thing they could travel in was that beat-up truck. They drove from airport to airport to search for a functional jet but all they found was a police helicopter, which they decided was a better choice than the truck. The helicopter was designed for four passengers and a pilot, which made it dangerously overloaded. However, Carl managed to coax the helicopter into flight using the airport runway. They still wanted to find a jet since the overloaded helicopter wasn't going to work for long distance travelling. They had to leave almost everything behind except for one gun each and all the ammo they could carry. Of course, Evaline brought her large designer luggage with her, which he thought was probably stuffed full of impractical dresses and high heels. Skylar brought his backpack with a few of his belongings when he saw that Evaline was allowed to bring her stuff. Skylar thought they should have stayed in the truck but he was out voted.

"Brace yourself this is going to be a hard landing!" Carl shouted to everyone.

Skylar hung on tight as the helicopter slammed onto the airport-landing pad. It was a jarringly hard landing but nothing seemed to break. Carl shut down the rotors and they got out of the helicopter. There was no sign of the brimstone cattle so they all headed towards the nearest hangar

with their guns at ready. Skylar was surprised to see Evaline confidently hold her own rifle. It made him wonder if there was more to her than he realized since he didn't think Roth would choose a wife for looks alone. The hangar bay door was shut so they entered through the man door. To everyone's relief, inside the hangar was a private jet about the same size as the Falcon and it looked undamaged. Carl climbed up into the jet and went straight for the cockpit. Skylar followed him and watched as he began flipping switches to check the jet's systems. He turned to Skylar and gave him a thumbs up.

Skylar turned to face the cabin where everyone waited and said, "It looks good."

"Great, let's split up in teams and search the airport for supplies," Lorenz told everyone.

"Ugh," Skylar groaned, "Can we just get to Colorado already?"

Evaline said, "I agree with Skylar."

Everyone nodded in agreement and looked at Lorenz who replied, "Fine, let's get this jet out of the hangar then."

Everyone but Evaline got out of the jet to help. Lorenz went to check the hangar offices for anything useful. Carl found the tug and began to hook it up to the jet's front wheel. Roth opened up the hangar bay door. Skylar and the others just watched, as they didn't know what needed to be done. After Carl finished hooking up the tug, he used the remote control to begin moving the jet. Roth and Skylar helped to ensure there was enough

clearance on each side of the wings. It seemed to Skylar that everyone was anxious to move on and get to their destination. Lorenz caught up to Carl and walked beside him as they left the hangar.

They made good progress and soon the jet was almost lined up with the runway. Skylar walked with Roth and Walter on the left side of the jet. Joe and Ken were walking alongside of the jet on the right side. Carl was in front of the jet while he operated the remote for the tug with Lorenz beside him. Skylar glanced over at Ken and Joe who seemed to be in a heated discussion. Just then, Skylar saw a group of four brimstone cattle run up the hillside next to Ken and Joe.

“Look out!” Skylar shouted but his warning wasn’t fast enough.

One of them ran into Joe and knocked him aside with its horns like a ragdoll. Ken turned to run but the bull chased after him. The brimstone bull quickly caught up to Ken, knocked him down and used its head to crush Ken’s chest, grinding him into the ground. Ken scream was cut short as the air was forced out of him. Joe tried to get back up but a brimstone cow stomped on him and then bit into his head ripping a chunk off his face. Another brimstone cow charged at Lorenz, as he lifted his rifle and fired. The other brimstone cow stopped running to bite into Joe’s leg and pulled on it as if it wanted Joe for itself. Skylar aimed his rifle at the cow charging at his father and fired. Roth, Walter and Carl shot their rifles as well. The cow knocked his father down and bit into his neck.

“No!” Skylar screamed as he watched his father being killed.

Skylar ran towards the cow as he fired his rifle and shot it in its eye. The brimstone cattle fell over beside his father. Skylar looked up at the bull that was holding Ken down. It had one hoof on Ken's chest as it looked up at Skylar. Bullets ricocheted off his head and only seemed to irritate the bull. He let out a loud huff at Skylar and then it bit down on Ken's neck. Blood squirted out as the bull picked up Ken and it turned to trot off dragging Ken along like a lion with its prey. The other brimstone cattle followed his lead and carried what was left of Joe. Everyone shot their guns until they were out of sight. Carl stopped first to hastily disconnect the tug and move it aside.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Carl shouted.

Skylar went to his father's body but Carl stopped him. Carl pointed to the hills beside the runway. There was a herd of brimstone cattle headed their way.

"We need to leave now!" Carl shouted.

They got into the jet and Carl had them airborne faster than Skylar thought was possible. No one even spoke about what happened. Skylar stared out the window. He didn't dare shut his eyes because the images of what happened returned to his mind's eyes. He felt like he was going to be sick and went to the bathroom to throw up. After completely emptying his stomach, he felt weak and exhausted. He slowly made it back to a seat. He sat there trying to breathe slower and stop his shaking. Someone put a cool washcloth on his head and he looked up to see Evaline.

“Here, this might help,” Evaline said and then left him alone.

***Section Break ***

With his father and so many of them gone, Skylar felt like it was up to him to keep this group together. No one was sure what to do next other than continue to Colorado. He went into the cockpit to talk with Carl about the plan.

Skylar asked, “I know my dad wanted to make sure we had a place in this new home using force if he had to but I doubt we can force them to let us in with so many of us gone. I’m not sure what to do now. What do you think?”

“I think we can’t give up. What do you know about the place we’re going? Did your dad tell you anything?”

“Not much, just that he sort of won a lottery but only as a backup and would have to wait if one of the main winners didn’t show up.”

“Based on the trouble we’re having, I think there will be a good chance of some no shows. You should be able to claim the winning spot on your father’s behalf.” Carl said.

“That sounds good but—” Skylar’s reply was interrupted by a voice on the radio.

“Hello? Can anyone hear me? We need help, please someone be there,” a female voice said.

Carl and Skylar looked at each other surprised to hear from another person.

Carl switched on the mic and replied, “Yes, you’re coming in loud and clear. What is your location?”

“Oh, thank god! We’re all alone and starving. Can you help us?”

“What is your location?” Carl repeated.

“Location? I don’t know. We were at a park but there were bugs everywhere trying to eat us. Then we found this house with lots of birds. The bugs haven’t found us but we ran out of food. I’m afraid to go outside because I think those bugs are still around,” the female voice said.

Carl clicked off the mic to speak to Skylar, “The girl sounds young. Either that or she is completely crazy!”

“Wait a minute, there were mutated locusts in Interlaken that tried to eat me. They had stingers like a scorpion and when one of them stung my leg, it went numb. I couldn’t even use my leg. I was lucky to get out of there alive. I don’t think she sounds completely crazy.”

Carl clicked the mic back on and Skylar asked, “What’s your name?”

“Peggy. My little brother is sick and I need help, he won’t get up,” Peggy pleaded.

“I think we can help, Peggy. How old are you and your brother? And can you tell me more about your brother?” Skylar asked.

“I’m twelve and my brother is eight. He hasn’t eaten anything in a couple of days and now he doesn’t want to get up. He just wants to sleep all day.”

“He is drinking water?” Skylar asked.

“Yes, a little when I bring it to him,” Peggy answered.

“That’s good keep giving him water. Do you know your home address?” Skylar replied.

“Yes, but it’s in Alaska. We were travelling with my foster parents to the United States and we were almost there. We stopped at a park to rest and those bugs killed them.”

“Do you know the name of the park?” Skylar asked.

“Manning? I think it was EC Manning,” Peggy answered.

“I’m on it,” Carl said to Skylar as he began to search the jet’s computer for the park’s location.

“You said there were birds in the house?” Skylar asked Peggy.

“Yes, I think they are hawks.”

“Are they dangerous? What are they eating?” Skylar asked wondering how the hawks weren’t dead. He pictured songbirds eating from a stockpile of birdseed. How could hawks still be alive he wondered.

“No, they don’t hurt us. And they have some kind of machine that dispenses food for them,” Peggy replied.

Carl switched off the mic to speak privately to Skylar, “It sounds like that machine makes charlem. Those kids are starving to death with a food source right in front of them.”

“What’s charlem?” Skylar asked.

“It’s a synthetic meat. It’s an old invention but never really caught on since no one liked the idea of eating synthetic meat. Anyway, it would be safe to eat as long as they cook the meat first.”

Carl pointed to the computer screen and said, “I found the park location. They’re just north of Washington State.”

“Canada? Crap, that’s way out of the way,” Skylar said.

“Yes, but it’s only a few extra hours to get there.”

Skylar clicked the mic on, “Peggy, that bird food is meat. If you cook it you can eat it.”

“Ew… okayee but I don’t know how to cook it.”

Skylar clicked off the mic again and said, “I think we should go get them. It’s the right thing to do. Besides, I remember my dad saying those lottery people wanted him to bring birds of prey. If we bring hawks it should increase our chances of getting in.”

“All right, I’ll re-route. Let’s see if we can figure out exactly where those kids are located. I’m guessing whoever owns those hawks and a meat synthesizer are rich and should be easy enough to find on the internet.”

Skylar clicked on the mic, “Peggy, can you look around the house for some mail? We need to know the address of the house so we can find you. We’re coming to get you and should be there in about—”

Skylar looked at Carl since he realized he didn’t even know where they were or how long it would take to get there.

“About three hours,” Carl replied.

“Thank you so much! I’ll go find some mail. Thanks!” Peggy cheerfully.

Carl clicked off the mic and said, “Good thinking about the mail, Skylar. Can you let the others know our plan? I hope that no one will have any objections. Either way, I’m flying us to Canada. I can’t let those kids die,” Carl said.

“Don’t worry, I think they’ll understand. Walter will grumble but even he wouldn’t let children die,” Skylar said and left the cockpit.

Chapter 15

Four days drifted by as Solana relaxed, ate canned food and sat up in the bridge to stare out at the ocean. Shane let her drive for hours until she grew tired and needed a break. Lukas was always nearby looking to get a turn to drive the yacht as well. They made great progress as headed north towards Southern California until Solana saw dark storms clouds directly in front of them.

“Lukas, can you go find Shane? I don’t like the look of those clouds,” Solana said.

Solana continued to head towards the dark clouds hoping Shane would be there soon. The waves were getting larger making it harder for her to stay on course. Shane and Lukas walked in then and looked at the clouds. Shane turned on the radar but nothing showed up on the screen.

“Damn, without radar it’s tough to figure how large that storm is,” Shane said.

Lightning struck the ocean far ahead of them and an explosion of blue fire spread out across the ocean surface. After a short distance, the billowing flames were swallowed up by the choppy waves.

“Did you see that?” Solana exclaimed.

Shane grabbed the steering wheel and immediately turned them away from the storm to head west and said, “I sure did! We need to avoid that

storm. The lightning is igniting the hydrogen sulfide. The concentration must be really high now."

"Is that why the flames are blue because it's hydrogen sulfide burning? And does that mean the air has less poison now?" Solana asked suddenly full of questions.

"Yes, hydrogen sulfide burns blue. I think the sulfide concentration would go down for a few seconds but more is still coming out of the ocean."

"Aren't we going to run out of time if we don't head to land soon," Solana said looking back at the storm.

"We might, but we won't survive in that storm. I'm hoping we can go out around it and end up in Northern California instead."

After Shane seemed satisfied of their distance from the storm, he switched their heading to directly north. Solana could still see the storm but it was too far to see if lightning was igniting the hydrogen sulfide or not. Nevertheless, when she saw lightning she was sure there would be more fiery explosions that billowed out across the water.

The next day, they still followed alongside the storm. The waves were large and the yacht rocked heavily. Almost everyone including the animals were struggling. The pumas were extremely cranky and hissed at everyone except Solana. She tried to calm them but they just wanted out of the yacht and couldn't understand why they were trapped. The horses were exhausted from trying to stand against the sway of yacht so they gave up and laid down. She fed, brushed and tried to comfort them but it didn't

seem like enough. Solana felt surprisingly fine and found she really liked being out on the ocean. However, she was still very anxious to see what her new home was going to be like. Solana decided to go back to the bridge. Lukas was no longer hanging out in the bridge as he was too sea sick to care about driving the yacht.

“Is that the same storm? Shouldn’t it be gone by now?” Solana asked Shane.

After a deep sigh, Shane replied, “That must be a hurricane and it seems to be growing. It’s forcing us to move further away from the coast. If this keeps up, we’ll be in Alaska before we hit ground.”

“What?!” Solana said wide-eyed.

Shane chuckled, “Relax young one, I was exaggerating. I want to get off this yacht as much as the rest of you but it’s not looking good. I’m hoping we’ll reach the north end of this storm soon so we can turn east.”

Solana looked out at the window and watched the storm. It was close enough for her to see the blue fiery explosions whenever the lightning struck water. However, most of the time the lightning streaked across the clouds and didn’t ignite the hydrogen sulfide. She began to wonder if they could make it through.

“What do you think would happen if a lightning would strike near the yacht?” Solana asked.

Shane looked at Solana a moment and replied, “I think there’s a good chance the yacht would be destroyed.”

Solana nodded and looked back at the storm then said, “So, where do you really think we‘re going to make it to land?”

“I wish I knew Solana. At this point, I’m guessing Oregon. Don’t worry we’ll get there we just need to be patient.”

“All right, I guess there’s nothing we can do about it anyway.”

*** Section Break ***

Another two days went by and they still hadn’t found an end to the storm. It was now the morning of August 11th. Everyone kept to themselves either because they were sick or depressed. They were losing hope. There was only one day left for them to get to Colorado. No one even wanted to think about what they would do if they didn’t get there on time. They knew they couldn’t survive long on this harsh planet without a poison free place to live. Solana didn’t want to think about failing so she checked on the animals then went up to the bridge. Shane looked tired but he seemed to be holding up better than the others were.

“Any sign of the storm letting up?” Solana asked.

“Well the clouds seem a little less dark, but it still doesn’t look good,and we have another problem,” Shane said and pointed to the fuel

gauge. “I ran the engines on high for too long. I figured we’d be there by now. We’re going to run out of fuel sometime today.”

Solana replied as she blew out a long sigh, “All right then that settles it. We’ll have to enter the storm. We’re out of time and fuel. If we’re going to die, we might as well die trying.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinkin’ when you came in. We can hold out until this afternoon then we have to turn toward shore.”

“I’ll go tell the others,” Solana said and left.

Solana had everyone meet in the main living area to break the bad news, “As you know, we’re running out of time but even worse than that we’re almost out of fuel. In a few hours, we’re going to turn into the storm and try to make it to shore.”

“How can we be out of fuel!?” Marcos snapped. “Shane said he had more than enough.”

“In order to make good time, we ran the engines too fast and burned up the fuel. We didn’t know we would end up having to travel so far. I’m sorry Papa.”

Esperanza said, “Solana, how much further can we go? The storm is too dangerous to enter. There must be another way.”

“Shane said we would run out of fuel sometime today. He wants to wait until this afternoon but any longer and we could end up stranded out here.”

Shekinah pleaded, “Let’s just try to get through the storm. I don’t want to die stranded out here in the middle of the ocean,”

“I agree with her,” Jayden added, “I’ve been so sea sick I’d gladly face the storm to reach land. I vote we turn into the storm now. Why wait?”

Marcos added, “Since we have to face the storm sooner or later, I agree we should get this over with and head for land. Besides, we don’t know for sure when the fuel will run out.”

Esperanza replied sadly, “Perhaps a quick death would be preferable than running out of fuel and starving to death.”

Marcos asked, “What do you think Solana? Do you want to go into the storm?”

“Yeah, it seems like the best choice at this point,” Solana said.

“Lukas, honey, what do you want to do?” Esperanza asked.

Lukas laid his head on the side of the couch. He looked up and said, “Uh huh, into the storm, let’s get this over with.”

Solana nodded and said, “I’m going to tell Shane we have decided to turn into the storm now. I’ll stay up there to help him. Everyone should get ready and brace themselves for a really rough ride.”

Solana returned to the bridge, “Shane everyone voted to head into the storm right away and not take the chance of running out of fuel.”

“Then, may the luck of the Irish guide us,” Shane said and turned the steering wheel into the storm.

The wind howled outside as Shane tried to keep the yacht facing into the waves. The waves were huge and looked like 30-foot waves to Solana. They splashed up over the bow and onto the front window blocking the view as the yacht crested each wave. As they crested the top of a wave, the yacht would land hard and sink deep into the ocean before another wave lifted the bow again. It was a torturous punishment of the yacht and all of its inhabitants. Solana held onto her heavy belly as she was jarred painfully. Solana would only get glimpses of the storm even though the windshield wipers ran at full blast. Lightning struck the ocean in front of them and the glowing blue fire billowed out towards them. The yacht dipped into the trough between the waves just as the fire was about to hit them. The fire spread out over the crest of the wave and dissipated before it could reach the yacht.

“That was close!” Solana said.

“Too close. I think the waves might be helping to break up the fire.”

“How far are we from land?” Solana asked nervously.

“About an hour,” Shane replied without taking his eyes off the waves.

Solana wasn’t sure the yacht could handle an hour of the brutal pounding even if they managed to avoid being burnt up in a blue fiery death. Shane looked tired and she saw beads of sweat on his forehead. She wanted to ask if he was all right but decided it was better not to keep talking and break his concentration. She didn’t think anyone else could handle steering the yacht in this storm so she decided to say nothing. The

yacht suddenly slammed down harder than before causing Solana to groan aloud.

“Are you all right?” Shane asked quickly glancing at Solana.

“Uh huh, I just wasn’t ready for that,” Solana replied somewhat embarrassed.

Solana wasn’t sure she was going to be all right as the pounding was really hurting her back and abdomen muscles. She thought that lying down would be a better choice. Suddenly, the winds shifted as they came over the crest of tall wave. It pushed the side of the yacht hard enough to force it into a slight angle. Shane tried to straighten the yacht but it was clear they were going to land at an angle.

“Oh Shit! Hang on, Solana!” Shane shouted.

Solana gripped her chair tight as the yacht dropped and slammed down into the water. It rolled heavily to one side, further and further. Solana feared the yacht would roll until it flipped upside down, but it slowed and it began to roll back upright. The yacht continued to roll towards the other side and then dug into the next wave, which seemed to help stabilize it. Solana suddenly sensed the animals were screaming. That seemed strange to Solana to think the animals were screaming and wondered if her own fear caused the sensation. She tried to ignore it as they crested another wave and this time Shane was able to keep the yacht straight as it crested over the top. Still, Solana couldn’t shake the feeling that the animals were very distressed.

“I need to go check on the animals,” Solana said.

“Be careful moving ‘bout in this storm,” Shane said.

“Right, I will.”

Solana took a deep breath and blew it out slowly as she waited for the yacht to slam into the next wave. Then she got up and headed towards the main room. Solana memorized the rhythm of the waves and when the next slam was about to happen she stopped and hung onto a railing and waited. The slam really hurt and all she wanted to do was find the softest bed she could to lie on.

“Someone wake me when we get to Colorado,” Solana said to herself feeling defeated.

Chapter 16

As she made her way down into the main cabin room, she could hear a loud high-pitched squeal from one of the horses. That made Solana quicken her pace. She entered the main cabin room as her mother tried to settle the grey Criollo horse. It reeled up, squealed and nearly fell sideways as the yacht rolled slightly to one side. Jayden and Shekinah knelt on the floor with their arms spread out to form a blockade between the pumas and the horses.

“Solana, help us!” The animals have gone crazy!” Shekinah yelled when she saw Solana.

Solana wasn’t sure which animal she should go to first. The pumas looked like they were ready to attack the horses and even possibly Shekinah and Jayden. Her grandmother’s horse was going to hurt itself or her mother if it didn’t calm down. It was also agitating the other horses. It was possible all five horses would bolt and could end up crashing through the side of the yacht. Solana was frightened as well but suddenly she felt a burst of anger at the whole situation.

“Stop this!” Solana shouted out with such a loud and dominating voice it surprised her.

Everyone including the animals stopped to look at Solana. When she realized, she had gotten their attention, she decided to try to get things

under control from where she stood. She projected out a feeling of calm as best as she could considering the situation and said with a firm voice, “Down, lie down.”

The animals looked at her with frightened yet curious eyes but didn’t lie down. Solana tried again.

“Lie Down,” Solana said and lowered her hand towards the ground. “You must lie down now,” Solana said and lowered her own body onto the floor.

The pumas stopped pacing and flopped down onto the floor. This immediately calmed the horses but they didn’t yet lie down. Solana crawled towards the pumas. When she reached them, she gently stroked their fur to calm and reassure them that everything was all right. Satisfied that they understood her she made her way over to the horses. All of them were lying down again so Solana crawled over to the horses. She rubbed and petted them and further calmed each one of them. Solana leaned up against Sunflower to rest as she sat on the floor. She found that being next to Sunflower comforted her as well. Everyone just watched Solana as they dealt with the constant slamming of the yacht.

Esperanza said, “Very impressive Solana. Since you seem to have the animals under control, I should go check on your father. He is very seasick.”

“Do you need help?” Solana asked worried about her father.

“You just did. I think you better stay here and keep these animals calm.”

“OK mama, I love you.”

“I love you too Solana. Thank you, Shekinah, Jayden for trying to help,” Esperanza said and headed down to the lower deck.

“Jayden, can you go to the bridge and see if Shane needs help? I don’t think he should be alone in case he gets hurt or anything goes wrong,” Solana said.

“Sure, good idea,” Jayden said and made his way towards the bridge.

Solana noticed that Shekinah watched Jayden leave and thought she wanted to go with him. In fact, she had noticed how they were always together lately.

“Maybe you should make sure Jayden makes it to the bridge. The yacht is rocking like crazy,” Solana said to give Shekinah an excuse to follow him.

Shekinah looked in Jayden’s direction a bit longer before replying, “No, I better stay here in case you need help.”

Solana didn’t want to be alone and was grateful Shekinah decided to stay with her. Solana continued to calm the horses as she moved from one to the next. She decided to put the saddles on the horses so they would be ready when they reached land. Shekinah helped with the saddles since it was no easy task with the yacht rocking so violently. By the time they were done, the horses seemed calmer. Solana sat down by the pumas to keep them calm as well. However, it turned out to be a constant battle as the animal’s nerves would fray each time the yacht leaned heavily to one side or

slammed down with extra intensity. After a while, Solana realized that more than an hour had passed.

“We should be getting to land soon. Shane said we were about an hour away before I came down here,” Solana said.

“Oh, thank the heavens! It feels like we have been in this storm forever. My whole body is aching. I’m never getting on another boat,” Shekinah said.

A sudden loud thunder made Solana startle and at nearly the same time the yacht walls and windows rattled loudly. The pumas jumped to their feet and hissed at the side of the yacht that rattled. The horses stood up frightened so Solana stood up and quickly went to Sunflower’s side to keep her calm.

“What was that?” Shekinah asked fearfully as she stood up as well.

Solana thought it was one of the hydrogen sulfide explosions but the windows were still intact so she believed they would be all right. She tried to think about what to tell Shekinah when they heard a loud crashing noise from the front of the yacht. They were thrown forward but Solana grabbed onto Sunflower’s mane to keep herself from flying forward. Sunflower stumbled forward and managed to keep herself from falling. Shekinah hit the floor next to the horses. The pumas instinctively spread out their legs and dug their claws into the floor to stop themselves.

“Are you OK?” Solana asked Shekinah.

“Yeah, I think so,” Shekinah said as she sat up.

The yacht leaned towards the bow. The horses turned to face the back of the yacht to make it easier to lean away from the sinking bow. Solana was still hanging onto Sunflower so she turned with her. She heard water rush in behind her and turned around to see it pouring into the main cabin. The pumas ran from the incoming water and zipped past the horses. The water over took Shekinah and spalshed onto Solana but Sunflower was dragging Solana up the main cabin. Solana hung on tightly as she looked around for a way out. She saw a boarded up sliding glass door at the back of the room. The yacht was tilting more and morewhich made the back of the yacht raise up higher. The horses slipped and slid slowly toward the water. Solana looked back at the water and saw that Shekinah hung onto a table at the edge of the water.

“Shekinah! We need to get that back door open,” Solana shouted even though she didn’t think Shekinah was going to be able to help.

Then she remembered how she was able to calm the animals with her voice and thoughts alone without touching them. Maybe she could project her thoughts to the pumas. The room was already half full of water and it was filling fast. Solana had to fight the urge to panic. The tilt of the yacht was too steep for the horses to climb and they slipped deeper into the water. Solana kept her grip on Sunflower’s mane. Holding onto Sunflower seemed to help keep both of them brave and calm. Sunflower used the buoyancy of the water to keep her from sliding all the way into the water. She just barely managed to stand on the cabin floor with most of her body in

the water. Solana took a deep breath and focused on the pumas that clung to the highest portion of the room at the back of the cabin. Solana visualized the pumas using their claws to pull off the boards on the sliding glass doors. Escape she thought, it's a way out of here. "Dig our way out, now!" Solana shouted at the pumas. To her amazement, the pumas responded and clawed at the boards. She projected the thought of them pulling at the board's edges and then they did that too. Shekinah followed Solana's idea and now hung onto one of the horses. Solana got onto the back of Sunflower as the water level rose up even higher. She saw her dry bag floating by so she reached out and grabbed it. It helped to keep her afloat so she wrapped one arm around the bag and held onto Sunflower with her other hand. All the horses swam frantically as they looked for a way out of the water. The water level was close to the back of the yacht now. Shekinah tried to climb out of the water up the cabin floor but she slipped and fell back into the water. Solana realized they would be trapped and drown if the pumas didn't get the boards off the door soon. The pumas worked furiously and they finally managed to get one of the boards loosened on one side. The pumas both clawed and pulled at it until it fell off completely and slid down into the water. They futilely clawed at the glass door trying to escape. Solana knew they would never get the door open. She would have to help but she still couldn't reach the door. She asked the pumas to back up closer to the water so she could hold onto them. They didn't respond as she felt a great deal of fear in them. She tried again, as she begged and showed them it was the

only way. If the water rose high enough to cover the door, the pressure would be too great for them to open it. It was only minutes before the water level hit the door. Finally, the male puma, Tapac, slowly backed down the floor towards the water. Its claws dug deeply into the cabin's floor.

"I'm going to try to climb up there. Here keep this safe for me," Solana said and shoved the dry bag towards Shekinah.

Shekinah nodded and looked frightened. Solana tried to stay focused on getting the door open so she urged Sunflower closer to the puma and then stood on Sunflower's back and reached out for the puma. She managed to grab his back leg and pull herself up onto the cabin floor on her knees. The puma's claws screeched against the floor as they slipped leaving deep gouges. They stopped slipping so Solana continued higher grabbing the puma's front leg next and pulled up further. Finally, the female puma, Yauri, backed down the floor so Solana could reach her as well. Solana climbed up next to Yauri until she could reach the door. Then she slowly stood up with her foot wedged against one of the Yauri's front paws. Solana unlatched the door and pulled it open. She climbed out onto the back of the yacht. The pumas practically leaped out and clung to the back of the yacht. Outside the storm raged and the waves crashed over the yacht but they were close to the shore. She realized she should be dying from the poisons but she felt OK so she thought the lightning must have burned off enough of the hydrogen sulfide. However, she didn't think it would be long before it came back. They had to get back to high ground. Solana reached down into the yacht.

“Come on Shekinah, take my hand!”

The water was nearly to the door now and Shekinah was able to reach Solana. Solana pulled her up and out of the yacht. Shekinah handed the dry bag back to Solana and then she kicked off the other board and opened the second sliding door. This helped give the horses more room to escape but they had to wait until the yacht was nearly flooded so they could get out.

Solana kicked her feet while holding onto Sunflower’s mane with one hand and the dry bag with her other hand as they headed for the shore. Her eyes began to burn so she decided to close them. She trusted her horse would guide them. She opened her eyes when she felt her horse rise up out of the water. The pumas were already on shore and she saw them run up the road toward higher ground. Shekinah and the other horses made it to shore with her.

“My eyes are burning!” Shekinah said as she blinked and rubbed her eyes.

“Mine too! It’s the hydrogen sulfide. We have to move to high ground.”

Solana gave her horse a quick squeeze and they were off following after the pumas. Solana looked back towards the ocean to look for her parents and the others but she couldn’t see anything with the wind, rain and her burning eyes.

“Did you see anyone else?” Solana asked Shekinah who rode the grey Criollo horse again.

“No, but maybe they got off the yacht first and are waiting for us.”

Luckily, it wasn’t far before Solana’s eyes stopped burning. Solana tied the dry bag to her horse’s saddlebag and dismounted. Then she looked towards the ocean for her family.

“Mama! Papa!” Solana shouted in vain into the blowing wind and heard her own desperation. She paused a moment to try to calm her emotions. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath then glanced at Shekinah.

“Jayden!” Shekinah said excitedly.

Solana looked down the road to see Jayden’s outline as he walked towards them. He carried someone and it looked like Shane walked beside him. Solana started down the road but Shekinah grabbed her arm to stop her.

“Wait, you’ve already breathed in too much poison,” Shekinah said and glanced at Solana’s belly.

Solana nodded and silently thanked Shekinah with a smile, then waited as the group approached them. When Solana realized Jayden carried her mother, she couldn’t contain herself any longer and ran up to Jayden.

“Mama!” Solana cried.

“She’s hurt really bad,” Jayden said.

Solana’s heart sank as she saw her unconscious mother with blood dripping from a gash in her forehead. Then she saw her mother’s arm. It

was misshapen, clearly broken with part of her forearm bone sticking out from her sleeve.

“Oh, my God! Mama, no,” Solana cried and followed Jayden towards the horses and Shekinah.

“I’m so glad you are OK,” Shekinah said to Jayden and Shane.

Solana looked away from her mother a moment to realize her father and Lukas were not with them, “Did you see my father? Lukas?”

Shane shook his head, “I’m sorry, Solana. We barely got your mother out. We couldn’t find them and waited as long as we could but they never came out of the water.”

“No,” Solana said weakly and looked towards the water then back at her mother.

She knew she would have to mourn her father and Lukas another time. Her mother needed her now. Solana looked around for shelter but there were only dead trees alongside the road leading away from the ocean.

“I’ll ride ahead and try to find help,” Solana said as she got on her horse.

“I’ll go with you,” Shekinah said and climbed back onto the grey horse.

“Just keep walking down this road Jayden, please. We’ll be right back,” Solana said as she urged Sunflower in a slow canter.

Solana wanted to gallop but she could barely stand the jarring of the smooth rocking canter. Shekinah’s horse followed Sunflower’s lead and

switched from a bouncy trot to a canter. It was getting dark as the storm clouds blocked most of the light from the setting sun but Solana was able to see the road well enough. She gritted her teeth against the pain of riding her horse so fast while pregnant but she was determined to find help for her mother. She wouldn’t lose her.

Chapter 17

Lightning flashed in the thick clouds below the jet. They approached their destination and there was no way around the storm.

“Tell everyone to sit down and buckle up,” Carl told Skylar. “It’s going to be a rough landing.”

Skylar quickly went back and let everyone know to buckle up. No one complained as they had been looking out the windows at the storm below them. The jet bounced in the turbulence as they approached the top of the clouds. Skylar went back into the cockpit and buckled up in a seat next to Carl. The jet bounced and jarred again but Carl seemed unfazed by it. This helped keep Skylar calm as well. He wasn’t sure what to do so he kept quiet. Soon they flew out of the clouds and Skylar could see the ground below and the blackness of the ocean in the distance. As he watched, lightning struck the ground near the ocean and a burst of blue flame spread out around it.

“Whoa, what was that, blue fire?” Skylar asked Carl.

“I think so,” Carl replied and then glanced back down at his instruments.

“Will it be safe for us to land?” Skylar asked.

“So far, I’ve only see the blue fire by the ocean. Hopefully, it won’t be a problem,” Carl replied.

“Where are we landing,” Skylar asked since he couldn’t see an airport anywhere as they rapidly approached the ground.

“That road down there. It will get us closest to those kids,” Carl replied.

“That road?” Skylar asked incredulously.

“That’s right. Don’t worry I got this. Provided we don’t get hit a sudden cross-wind or blue-fire explosion,” Carl said.

Skylar tightened his seat buckle and gripped his chair tightly as he watched them approach the narrow looking road below them. Rain pounded on the windshield and the road looked slick. Despite all that, Carl managed to land the jet gently like it was a sunny day.

“That was an amazing landing Carl. I’m really glad you’re with us,” Skylar said.

“Thanks, but you should go get those kids now.”

“Right. Roth said he would go with me to get them. We’ll try to be quick but if you see any of those brimstone cattle, just get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving without you and Roth, so be careful and get back quick,” Carl said.

Skylar and Roth grabbed their guns and headed out. They ended up not needing gas masks with the elevation high enough. Although the storm winds blew some of the hydrogen sulfide in off the ocean, it dissipated enough to breathe. Besides Skylar was sure the lightning helped to burn some of it up. According to the address that Peggy found, they were only

about a ½ a mile north-west from the jet. They walked down the road headed west. The wind and rain blew into Skylar's face making it hard to watch for danger. Skylar thought the slow flying scorpion locusts wouldn't do well in the wind anyway.

"I doubt we will see any of those scorpion locusts in this storm," Skylar said to Roth.

Roth nodded and added, "Hopefully, those bastard cattle aren't around here either."

A few moments later Roth said, "I'm sorry about your Dad."

Skylar felt sad about losing his dad but he was not really that close to him. It was much more difficult when his mother passed away. He didn't spend much time with his father as he was always busy running his business. Yet with his father gone, he felt lonely and somewhat scared that he could no longer look to his dad to provide for him. He never had to worry about money as long as his dad was around. He would have to start being the responsible man his father always wanted him to be.

"Thanks," Skylar replied.

They turned onto a side road that headed towards the address. After another turn and a short walk, they stood in front of an old stone mansion.

Skylar checked the address and said, "This is it."

"All right, let's go find those kids and get out of here."

"It looks old, like it could be haunted," Skylar said.

After a chuckle, Roth replied, “I’d rather deal with ghosts than anything else we’ve seen lately.”

The old stone house was up on a hill and looked to be over 100 years old. Skylar thought it would be perfect for a horror film. What in the world made those kids choose this house he wondered? Then he remembered how those scorpion locusts were able to find ways into a modern home. It would make sense to choose a house that looked like a castle if you were trying to hide from them. He looked up into the sky for the scorpion locusts and squinted as rain pelted his eyes. Skylar glanced at Roth and noticed they were both completely soaked from the rain. The old mansion looked dark and Skylar didn’t think to bring a flashlight.

“Did you bring a flashlight by any chance?” Skylar asked Roth as they approached the front door of the stone mansion.

Roth smiled and pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and clicked it on, “Of course.”

They opened the large front doors and stepped inside. He was surprised the doors were left unlocked. The house was dark but in good condition. The foyer had marble floors and a large chandelier hanging above them. There were twin grand staircases that curved up to the second floor.

“Peggy?” Skylar shouted.

There was no response. Roth shined the flashlight around but they saw no clues as to where the kids were.

“I hope this isn’t some kind of trap,” Roth said.

“What? Wait, could this be a trap?” Skylar asked suddenly very concerned.

“I don’t know, sometimes people use kids to lure people in. Let’s keep quiet and stay alert.”

“OK,” Skylar whispered.

“You said the girl mentioned birds?” Roth asked quietly.

“Yeah, she said there were hawks. Do you think she was lying?”

Roth thought for a moment before replying, “I doubt anyone would lie about that. If it was a trap, I would think you would have the kids say something about food or some kind of valuables.”

“So, if there really are hawks, where would they keep hawks? In the back yard?”

After nodding, Roth motioned them forward and they moved deeper into the dark mansion. As they moved through the mansion, Skylar marveled over every room. He had never seen such a beautiful home. It might be old on the outside but the inside had been kept in meticulously good condition. Every room was large with expensive looking furniture and décor. He wondered who used to live in such an incredible home.

“Man, these people must have been filthy rich,” Skylar whispered while looking around.

“I know, this place is something else,” Roth said quietly.

“Over there,” Skylar said seeing some light shining through a glass doorway in another nearby room.

They crept towards the light and saw vegetation through French doors. It looked like a tropical garden.

Roth replied, “I think we found the aviary. Cover me while I check it out.”

Skylar readied his gun and leaned against the wall while Roth slowly opened the French door. Roth went into the greenhouse and Skylar moved to the doorway to cover his back. There was a curving stone path that led into the garden. It was a large glass greenhouse filled with tropical plants including tall palm trees. There were lights hanging from the ceiling and a misting system as well. A large bird flew by, which he thought might be one of the hawks. It seemed strange that the owners would keep hawks in a tropical garden but some rich people did strange things with their money.

Skylar realized Roth had moved further into the gardens and was out of sight. He was supposed to be watching out for him. He stepped into the garden and started slowly down the path.

Roth shouted, “Skylar, come on in. Everything is fine.”

Relieved Skylar walked faster down the path and came to an opening in the center of the greenhouse. There was a large water fountain in the center of circular area paved with stones. Roth stood beside a young girl with long dark brown hair. She wore a dirty pink t-shirt and shorts with a backpack on her back. She looked like a Native American to Skylar although he never saw a Native American in person but he used to love watching old American westerns as a kid. There was a shorthaired Native American boy

lying on a bench with a pillow and blanket. The bench was at the edge of the circle facing the water fountain. A large red-tailed hawk stood on the back of the bench and watched over the boy. The hawk paced back and forth as if agitated.

“Peggy? I’m Skylar, from the radio. Is this your brother?”

“Yes, he insisted on staying out here close to the hawks. So, I gave him a pillow and blanket. He is so weak; can you help him?”

“We can try,” Skylar said as he walked towards the boy.

The hawk flew off as soon as Skylar was close. Skylar paused a second to watch the hawk then he continued. As soon as the hawk flew off, the boy turned his head to look at Skylar. Skylar knelt down beside the boy and noticed there was some bits of red meat on his blanket that Skylar thought must be charlem. It looked like the hawk had dropped it there for the boy. That’s strange he thought the hawks must really have taken to the boy.

“What’s your name?” Skylar asked.

“Phil,” the boy said weakly.

“My friend and I would like to help you and your sister. We’re going to a place where there will be lots of food and it will be safe from any bad things. Would you like to go with us?”

After a moment, Phil asked, “Can I bring the birds?”

“Yes, we wouldn’t leave without them,” Skylar said as he suddenly wondered how they would catch the hawks. He looked at the boy who seemed very pale and weak. They needed to get him medical help soon.

“What do you say? Do you want to go with us?” Skylar asked Phil.

Phil nodded and looked at his sister and smiled a little.

“I’ll look around for some cages or something to put the hawks in,” Skylar said.

“No,” Phil said with a rough voice.

“Huh? No?” Skylar asked Phil.

“No cages mister. The hawks will follow my brother,” Peggy said.

“But won’t they fly away when we get outside?” Skylar asked and glanced at Roth for help. Roth shrugged as he seemed more anxious to leave and wasn’t worried about the hawks.

“All right, then let’s get back to the jet since we need to hurry anyway. Can you walk Phil?” Skylar asked guessing the answer was no.

Phil slowly shook his head no and looked somewhat scared about the idea of trying.

“Can I carry you?” Skylar asked not wanting to upset the boy.

Phil nodded, yes. Skylar slung his rifle onto his back and then gently scooped up Phil with the blanket still covering him. Skylar walked towards the door that led into the house. He felt a light tap on his arm and looked down at Phil. He shook his head no and pointed towards the back of the greenhouse.

“There’s a door that way?” Skylar asked.

Phil nodded.

“Is there a door at the back of the greenhouse Peggy?”

Peggy shrugged, “Yes, it goes to the backyard. Wouldn’t it be easier for the hawks to follow us?”

“Oh yeah, that makes sense,” Skylar said and they walked towards the back of the greenhouse. He noticed there several hawks flew from tree to tree and followed them. They approached large glass double doors at the back of the greenhouse and opened them both wide open. They stepped out into the backyard gardens. There were sculpted bushes, dead flowerbeds, and stone trails that led off in different directions. Skylar thought it was probably a beautiful garden at one point. Phil tugged at his shirt. Skylar looked at Phil. Phil pointed at the greenhouse and shook his head. Skylar looked and realized the hawks hadn’t come outside.

“The hawks aren’t following us?” Skylar said. “Any ideas Peggy?”

Peggy seemed confused, “They followed him everywhere,” she said and started back towards the greenhouse door.

Just then, five hawks flew out through the doorway and zipped past them. Then one-by-one they circled back around and landed nearby on perches.

“Good. Let’s keep moving,” Roth said, “Like you said Skylar we need to hurry.”

“Why do we need to hurry?” Peggy asked as she followed them.

Skylar answered, “This place we’re going to is a meeting place. The people said they would only be there until noon tomorrow. After that, they’re going to their actual home and we won’t know where. Although he

thought that sounded a little suspicious, he figured it was better not to give out your safe haven address too freely.

Peggy replied, “Oh, I think my foster parents were taking us there too. Do you think it’s an underground home?”

“I don’t know, but I hope not. I will miss the sun,” Skylar said.

They walked quietly down the road until one of the hawks flew by Skylar’s head, which made him wonder why the hawks were so attached to Phil.

“So, why do these hawks follow Phil?” Skylar asked and looked at Peggy.

Peggy replied, “Animals like my brother for some reason.”

Skylar thought it sounded like some kind of Snow White story and wished he had that talent as well. He watched the hawks fly along. They would fly ahead, land somewhere, and watch them as they slowly walked by. They came to the end of the side road and turned to head down the main road towards the jet.

Chapter 18

“Not far now,” Skylar said to everyone and himself. His arms ached from holding Phil. The boy was thin and light but he wasn’t used to holding anything for so long. Skylar thought he heard the sound of hooves on pavement approaching them from behind. For a second, fear filled his body as he thought it could be brimstone cattle. He hoped the sounds of the storm was simply playing tricks on him but he stopped to listen just in case. He really did hear the sound of hooves but he was sure it sounded like horses.

“That sounds like horses, doesn’t it?” Skylar asked Roth.

Everyone had stopped and turned around to look for the source of the sound.

“I think it is horses. We should hide and let them pass,” Roth said.

Skylar replied, “Right, quick into those trees on the side of the road.”

The horses appeared out of the darkness before they could get to the trees.

“Hello? Please, wait,” a desperate woman called out.

Skylar saw two women on horses who rode towards them. The one on the Tobiano horse sounded so forlorn he felt compelled to help her. They weren’t carrying any weapons and he had his rifle. He figured there was no

reason to hide, so he waited for them to approach. Roth stood beside him with Peggy pushed behind him. He had his rifle raised and ready.

“That’s close enough,” Roth said.

Solana stopped her horse, “Please, my mother needs help. She’s badly hurt and bleeding. Is there anywhere we can take her for medical supplies?”

Skylar looked at the woman and wondered if she was trying to trick them. She was young, beautiful and clearly full term pregnant. What was she doing out here so pregnant? Her black hair was soaking wet as was her dirty yellow dress. The dress was torn at the bottom and showed much of her tan naked leg. As he raised his eyes back to her face, he realized he could see the shadow of her nipples showing through her wet dress. Her breasts were large and rounded and suddenly he felt a twinge of arousal. He quickly looked away disgusted with himself. How could he feel that way? She was so pregnant. Where was her man he wondered but then decided he was probably dead like so many of his own family and friends. He looked back at the woman, she was so beautiful he wanted to keep looking at her and had to resist letting his eyes explore her body.

Roth spoke up since Skylar said nothing, “We’re not from around here lady. Maybe you could try some houses up that side road.”

“Oh OK, thanks,” Solana said sadly and started to turn her horse.

“Wait! We have a jet back this way. We have some first aid supplies,” Skylar said quickly not wanting her to leave and ignored the dirty look Roth gave him.

“Thank you so much. My mother is just down the road a bit. Shekinah, can you go get them?”

“Sure but, be careful Solana,” Shekinah replied and turned her horse.

Skylar glanced at the girl named Shekinah and realized he had hardly even noticed her. She had dark brown hair and dark colored skin like a gingerbread cookie. He thought she might be from Mexico but he wasn’t sure. He looked back at the girl named Solana. She looked exotic to Skylar with her black hair and brown eyes. Her skin was tanned but not as dark as the other girl. Off to the side of the road behind Solana he saw something move. He focused in on the movement and was surprised to see two large cats that ran towards them.

“Look out!” Skylar said and saw Roth turned and pointed his rifle at the cats.

“No! Wait! Don’t shoot! They’re with me,” Solana shouted as she dismounted her horse.

Did she say they were with her, he wondered. Who is this girl? He watched her smile at the cats as they approached. Her smile brightened her face and made her even more beautiful. The cats ran up close to Solana and turned to hiss at Roth who still had his rifle pointed in their direction.

“Roth, it’s OK. You better lower your gun,” Skylar said.

“You’re lucky I didn’t shoot them lady,” Roth said as he lowered his rifle.

“Ooo, can I pet them?” Peggy said and stepped out from behind Roth.

Solana replied, “They don’t trust strangers.”

But Peggy was already on her way to the cats. When they saw her approach, they went right up to her, brushed their heads against Peggy and purred. Peggy giggled and scratched each of their heads. Solana moved closer and joined in petting the cats. She had let go of her horse’s reins to get closer to the cats. Skylar watched the horse a moment to see if it would wander off but it stayed nearby and watched Solana.

“They look like cougars. Are they cougars? Where did you get them? They’re so amazing!” Peggy blurted out excitedly, “Phil, do you see these?”

When Phil didn’t respond, Peggy turned to look at him. Skylar glanced down and saw that Phil was asleep.

“He’s sleeping. How about we go to the jet now?”

Skylar glanced at Solana who looked down the road. He followed her gaze but didn’t see anything as it was too dark. Suddenly, Skylar was aware of the sound of more horses’ hooves clomping on the cement.

“What is your name?” Solana asked Peggy.

“I’m Peggy.”

“Well Peggy, these cats are cougars but, where I’m from we call them pumas. They seem to have many names like mountain lion, panther and even catamount. Pretty neat huh?” Solana said to Peggy.

“Yeah that’s cool. They’re so big and soft,” Peggy said as she continued to pet the purring cougars.

Skylar wanted to try petting them as well but he held Phil. The sound of the horses grew louder. He looked up the road to see who was approaching. There were four horses and two people walked beside them. Shekinah rode one of the horses and led the group. As they got closer, he could tell there were two men and one of them was carrying someone. That must be Solana's mother Skylar thought.

"Over here," Solana shouted and then turned to look at Skylar. "We have extra horses if your-" Solana paused, looked at Phil and back up at him again, "your son wants to ride one."

"Oh, he's not my son. Thank you, but I think he's too weak to ride a horse anyway. His sister Peggy said he hasn't eaten in days. We came here to rescue them."

"Can I ride a horse?" Peggy asked Solana.

"Oh sure," Solana replied, "Would you like to ride my horse?"

Peggy shook her head no and glanced at the horses. Then she pointed at her mother's chestnut-colored Criollo horse.

"Good choice, Peggy. That is my mother's horse. Come on I'll help lift you up."

Solana easily helped Peggy climb up onto her mother's horse.

"His name is Mr. Red Jack. He's a good boy so just hold onto the saddle and he will follow us."

"OK!" Peggy said with a giant smile.

“Solana, your mother’s pulse is very faint. I’m afraid we don’t have much time,” a man with an Irish accent and dark curly hair said as they approached.

Solana’s mother had blood caked on the side of her head and her arm was badly broken. Skylar thought she looked a lot like Solana only older maybe in her late forties. Skylar looked at Roth who also looked at the injured woman. Roth glanced up at Skylar and had a grave look in his eyes. Roth didn’t need to say anything because Skylar could tell by that look that he didn’t think she would make it. Skylar hoped he was wrong and decided to hurry everyone along.

“Let’s go, this way,” Skylar said as he figured introductions could wait.

As they walked, Skylar glanced at the man who held Solana’s mother. He looked strong and handsome with dark hair and a skin color similar to Shekinah’s skin. He wondered if he was Solana’s man. He figured they could talk some while they walked so he could get to know them.

“I’m Skylar, and my companions are Roth, Peggy and Phil,” he said nodding his head toward each of them as he said their names.

“Jayden,” the handsome man said.

Skylar glanced at the Irish man and he replied, “Shane, nice to meet you.”

“I’m Solana and that’s Shekinah,” Solana said next even though Skylar had already figured out their names.

Everyone was eerily quiet after the introductions. Skylar thought they looked even more exhausted than him and Roth. He wondered where Solana was from but wasn't sure if it was the best time for personal questions as her mother struggled to survive. Yet he couldn't stop wondering, what happened to them and why did they travel with Solana so pregnant. Since they came from the direction of the ocean, maybe they too could be lottery winners. Why else would they risk their lives to travel across the sea with animals? He was about to ask her when two hawks flew by down the center of the group. One of the hawks nearly hit Solana's head getting so close the tips of its wings flicked her hair.

Solana ducked instinctively and pulled her out of a quiet trance, "Whoa! Was that a hawk?"

"Yep, they're with me," Skylar said with a smirk.

Chapter 19

Solana looked at Skylar for a few seconds before she replied with a slight smile, “oh really, well can you ask them not to fly into my head?”

“Hey, those hawks are my brother’s,” Peggy said.

Skylar smiled and shrugged when Solana gave him a challenging look. Skylar looked back at Peggy to check on her. She really seemed to enjoy the horseback ride. He wished he could ride one of the horses but was afraid to wake Phil.

“Me personally, I would have chosen to ride that one,” Skylar said to Peggy inclining his head towards the bay-colored horse. Solana looked to see which horse Skylar chose and smiled.

“I’m not sure you can handle her. My father called her Crazy Girl and the name suits her.”

“She sounds like a real challenge. I’ve never ridden a horse before.”

“Well maybe someday I can show you how but you might want to start with an easier to handle horse.”

“I’d like that,” Skylar said and then noticed the jet up ahead, “There’s the jet.”

“I’ll let them know we’re coming,” Roth said and jogged up ahead.

It wasn’t long before Evaline came out to meet them. Skylar hoped she wasn’t planning a long social meeting. They didn’t have time for nail

polish discussions but to his surprise she didn't say anything, she walked right up to Solana's mother with urgency. She put her finger on the woman's neck to check her pulse. Jayden stopped walking to let her check.

"We need to hurry and get her in the jet. It looks like she has lost a lot of blood. Does anyone know her blood type?" Evaline said surprising Skylar.

"She's her mother," Skylar said gesturing towards Solana.

Evaline looked at Skylar and down to the boy in his arms. Then she turned towards Solana.

"No sorry, I don't know. You can take some of my blood if it's the right type," Solana said.

"OK honey, good," Evaline replied and then she looked at the boy Skylar carried. She walked up to him and took his pulse. She seemed satisfied and turned backed to Jayden. "Young man, bring her to the back of the jet, my husband is preparing a bed for her. And Skylar bring me the boy as well."

Jayden, Skylar and Peggy followed Evaline into the jet. Solana turned to pet her cougars for a second and say, "Shane, will you keep an eye on the horses for me?"

"I sure can Solana," Shane replied.

"I'll help Shane," Shekinah said and stayed outside.

Solana went into the jet. She wondered if one of them were rich to own such a nice jet. She saw an older man wearing a cowboy hat glance up as she entered the jet. He nodded at Solana but frowned and Solana wasn't

sure what the man was upset about. Instead of guessing, she decided to introduce herself.

“I’m Solana. Is this your jet? It’s very nice,” she asked hoping a compliment would improve his mood.

“Hah, no it’s not mine. We commandeered it and since the owners are likely dead I doubt they’ll mind.” Walter glanced at Solana’s belly, “You got yourself in quite a predicament don’t ya? Looks like you’re about to pop any moment! Was that Jayden fellow your man? Doesn’t seem like it.” Walter glanced out the window.

Solana was shocked at his utter rudeness and at first struggled to find words to respond but when he glanced out the window presumably to look for her man her anger boiled freeing her tongue.

“Oh you won’t find my man out there! He’s buried in Argentina where I come from, which is where rude people like you don’t live!”

Walter seemed taken aback for a moment, then sighed before replying, “I’m sorry ma’am, you’re right, I don’t know what got into me. I wasn’t expecting…company. Look, we lost a lot of good people getting this far, so I doubt we can keep you safe.”

Jayden approached and Walter glanced at him then back at Solana but didn’t say a word.

“I’m heading back outside,” Jayden said as he gestured towards the exit. Solana stepped aside to let him through. Then she turned away and headed to the back of the jet deciding she was done talking to Walter.

Esperanza was on a divan with a pillow under her head and a blanket covering her. Evaline's designer luggage was opened nearby and was full of medical supplies.

"Roth, can you lay out the other two chairs into a divan for the boy?" Evaline said.

"Please, put the boy on the divan when Roth is done," Evaline said to Skylar.

Skylar stood looking at the luggage with a strange expression on his face.

"Did you think my luggage was full of dresses, Skylar?" Evaline asked sarcastically when she saw him gawking.

"Um…" Skylar hesitated and Roth spoke not giving Skylar a chance to answer.

"Skylar, the bed is ready, go ahead and put the boy down."

Skylar gently laid Phil down on the divan. Peggy sat on the edge of the divan next to her brother and stroked his forehead as she whispered that it was going to be all right. Skylar glanced at Evaline and saw she was cutting away the sleeve from Solana's mother's arm. It was gruesome and he wished he never looked. Skylar decided he needed some water and turned to get away from the intense scene. He ran right into Solana and had to reach out and grab her arms to keep her from falling backwards.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Skylar said turning red with embarrassment as her pregnant belly pressed against his stomach. He quickly let he go and stepped back.

“It’s OK,” Solana said also blushing.

“I need some water. Do you want any?” Skylar asked.

“Yes, I would. Do you have anything to eat,” Solana said but then turned bright red, “I mean if it’s no trouble.”

“I’ll find something for you,” Skylar said and headed toward the jet’s galley near the front of the jet.

*** Section Break ***

Skylar downed a cup of water then refilled it and filled a second cup. As he did, he heard people talking. He glanced and realized everyone else was outside the jet. Even Carl and Walter had left the jet to meet the newcomers. He doubted Jayden was Solana’s man because he wouldn’t have left her all alone with her mother in critical condition. Unless he needed some fresh air after all the blood, in which case Skylar thought maybe he’s not as strong as he looks. He opened a cupboard, grabbed a handful of snack bars, and headed back to Solana. Roth was duct taping emergency blankets to the ceiling to block off the view to Solana’s mother. Skylar didn’t

think that was necessary until he saw the look on Peggy's pale face. Evaline was drawing blood from Solana's arm as she sat in a nearby chair. Skylar paused as he held the drinks and snacks as Solana looked up. Evaline finished and took the blood to a table on the other side of the jet that she had setup with some blood equipment on it.

"Oh, thank god, I'm so hungry," Solana said which encouraged Skylar.

"Here you go," Skylar said as he set the cup of water and snacks on the small table between two tan leather chairs.

"Can I have some?" Peggy said as she approached.

"Sure," was all Skylar had to say before Peggy ripped open the a snack bar and ate.

Skylar handed Peggy the other cup of water. Solana looked up at Skylar and smiled. She seemed to know he just gave away his cup of water.

"Thanks, Skylar" Solana said.

"Yeah, thanks!" Peggy said with a full mouth. Peggy took her cup of water and a couple of snack bars and went back to sit by her brother.

Skylar sat down on the chair across from Solana, "Solana, can I ask you something?"

"Mm Huh," Solana hummed and nodded since she was chewing and tried to be polite.

"This is going to sound weird but my father told me he had won some kind of lottery. Well he didn't really win but he won second place. He mentioned we had to go to Colorado and bring animals. He died on the way

here though and I don’t know what to do. All these people are counting on me to somehow get us in,” Skylar realized he was rambling nervously. Women don’t normally make him this nervous but there was something different about her. He didn’t think it was her pregnancy either. Strangely, the fact that she was pregnant didn’t really bother him at all. He was so curious about her.

Solana finished chewing to respond, “It doesn’t sound weird. But what was your question?”

“Oh, right. It seems like you have traveled from far away and brought animals with you. I was thinking maybe you’re a lottery winner too. Or maybe I breathed in too much poison,” Skylar said suddenly he felt stupid and wished he hadn’t brought it up. What was he trying to accomplish anyway he wondered? Skylar heard Evaline and Roth working in the background. It sounded like they were setting up IVs for both Phil and Solana’s mother.

Solana chuckled at Skylar’s poison comment and replied, “Actually, I am a lottery winner. It was my birthday when I found out I won. At first, my family didn’t believe it was real. But, since I’m obviously pregnant, I wanted to find somewhere safe for my baby and family to live. We have been travelling for so long. We came all the way from Argentina and now we’re so close but I don’t think we can make it on time. They said no one will be there after noon tomorrow. If that’s true then we travelled all this way for

nothing and all I have left of my family is my baby and mama," Solana looked away and tried to stop herself from crying.

Skylar leaned closer to Solana and grabbed her hands, "Hey, it's going to be all right."

Skylar didn't know why he had done that, was about to let go and pull away when Solana's tear streaked face turned back to him, and smiled. She nodded and took one of her hands out of his to brush away her tears. Skylar was happy she kept one of her hands in his. He thought of his Dad and felt sad too. It was hard to believe he was gone but for some reason when her held her hand and helped her cheer her up it helped him deal with the pain. He wondered who she was travelling with since she said her baby and mother were only ones left.

"Those people who are with me, I met them on the way here. They're my friends now and I want to help them if I can," Solana said as if reading Skylar's mind.

"Come with us, Solana. We're going to Colorado too and flying there as soon as we can. We can still make it on time."

"Really, you'd do that for me and my friends?" Solana asked and hesitated a moment, "But what about my horses and the pumas? I can't leave them behind."

Just then, one of the hawks flew into the jet and landed on the back of a nearby chair.

“Looks like that answers that, they’re coming with us too!” Skylar said as he looked around. “Seems like I’m going to need to make more room for the horses.”

Skylar stood up to leave then turned back and gently took Solana’s hand and kissed it. “Don’t worry; everything is going to be all right.”

Evaline walked up to Solana as Skylar released her hand. She paused but didn’t say anything to Skylar.

“Looks like your blood is a good match for your mother. I’m going to draw some more blood if that’s OK?” Evaline said.

“Oh, thank goodness. Anything to help my mama. Will she be all right?”

“It’s too soon to tell for sure but we’re doing everything we can for her.”

“Are you a doctor?” Solana asked.

“No, but I am a nurse,” Evaline said.

Skylar asked surprised, “But didn’t you work for Roth as a secretary?”

“Yes, Skylar. Honestly, I didn’t like being a nurse. I didn’t like seeing people hurt all the time so I quit.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t know,” Skylar said feeling like a jerk, “Well, I better go get help to make room for the animals,” Skylar said and left.

Chapter 20

Shekinah walked up and sat with Solana as the men worked to make room for the horses. Solana figured Shekinah decided to stay out of the way since there were five men working to clear the jet.

Shekinah said, “Skylar sure seems to like you; did you see the way he checked you out when you were riding your horse? For a second, I thought he might pull you off your horse and do you right there!”

“Shekinah! I don’t think it was like that. I mean, I did notice he was looking but then he seemed embarrassed. It was almost cute.”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“I don’t know, he is cute but I can’t be thinking about relationships right now. I need to focus on staying safe and getting us to Teal Haven.”

“Yeah speaking of staying safe, at first I wasn’t sure we could trust these people but they seem to be nice enough,” Shekinah said.

“I agree, I have a good feeling about them. It was how they were taking care of those little kids. Bad people don’t go out of their way to rescue anyone.”

After a moment, both of them looked towards the front of the jet to watch the men work. Skylar worked hard wrenching the on the bolts that held down a chair. He was wearing a tight black shirt and jean shorts. She saw his well-defined arm and leg muscles tense with the work. He looked muscular in an athletic way not overly large like a body builder but strong

and lean. His messy blonde hair fell forward onto his face and occasionally he would stop to brush it back with his hand. His hair was wavy and nearly down to his shoulders. He had a shadow of a beard and mustache giving him a manly look. Suddenly he glanced back at her, his blue eyes stared right into hers as if he sensed she was looking at him. Solana quickly looked away.

“Look at you Solana, you’re drooling over him,” Shekinah said with a chuckle.

Solana smiled and blushed, “I’m not!” then added, “Besides, look at me. I’m so pregnant. What man would want me?”

“Seems to me like that one does,” Shekinah said.

Solana looked at Skylar and saw him rushing to remove furniture. They made good progress opening up space in the jet. Solana smiled and felt warmth rush through her body. She watched Skylar and wondered if he really did like her. She watched him help Jayden carry a chair out of the jet. Skylar said something to Jayden and they glanced back at them. Solana looked at Shekinah and wondered if her and Jayden were getting close. She had wanted to ask her about that but didn’t know how to bring it up. Now seemed like the perfect time.

“Jayden seems to have taken a liking to you,” Solana said.

“You think?” Shekinah said smiling brightly.

“Oh yes, he follows you around everywhere. He’s always looking for a way to help you or talk to you.”

“He does, doesn’t he? He’s so handsome. I’ve had a crush on him since the day I met him but he didn’t seem to notice me back at Machu Picchu.”

“I bet he was too busy there.”

“Yeah, he was always running around having to do things for the queen,” Shekinah said and smiled.

Despite the hard-working men, it took them a few hours to finally get the jet opened up enough for the animals to fit inside. They took out most of the chairs and tables to make enough room. Once they were finished, her and Shekinah went to help load the horses into the jet. The horses were reluctant at first but Solana was able to calm them with her touch and mindspeak. She simply waited by the jet to soothe the next horse and then she guided into the jet. She whispered to them quietly so they would think she was a horse whisperer. She was afraid the strangers would think she was a freak if they knew she could speak to the animals with her mind. The horses barely fit into the jet and had to stand in the center aisle in a long single-file line. However, with the chairs removed she was able to get around them and back to the exit door.

Next, it was time to get the pumas into the jet. They were even more nervous about the jet, which to them appeared to be another cage like the yacht. Solana had to walk away from the jet to get them to approach her. She knew they were about to run away. She didn’t think they would survive long on their own. After a while, they came to Solana’s side and she sat with

them a while and stroked their fur. She visualized food and comfort inside the jet like it was a den. She also stressed a sense of danger in this area as she hoped that would motivate them to enter the jet. Then slowly she stood up and walked towards the jet and hoped they would follow her. They didn't. She slowly stepped into the jet and pretended not to be watching them. This had to work she thought. Once more, she projected as loudly as she could a feeling of fear about the area. Hurry, she screamed in her head, you must hide. Then at last the pumas bounded after her and leaped into the jet.

Solana sighed with relief as she watched the pumas examine the inside of jet and they kept to the side of the jet to stay clear of the nervous horses. The rest of the hawks flew in moments later as if they too had heard Solana's thoughts of danger. Carl quickly shut the door as soon as the last of them were inside so none of the animals would escape.

"For a while, I thought we would have to leave without those cats," Carl said as he locked the door and headed for the cockpit. "Get ready, I'll be taking off shortly."

"Can I help you navigate Carl," Shane asked.

"Sure, looks like there is a shortage of seats in the passenger area anyway. Come on I'll show you a few things," Carl replied as he headed for the cockpit.

Solana went to find a place to sit down, and noticed Walter sat in a chair by himself near the front of the jet. She walked past him and hoped to

avoid talking to him. Then she saw everyone further back and headed their way. Someone had converted the table and chairs into divans. Shekinah and Jayden sat in the divan but there was a space open for her so she sat next to Shekinah. Roth, Evaline and Skylar sat in the divan across from them. Solana looked around and realized how strange it was to see all the animals inside a jet. The pumas had followed Solana and settled down on the side of the jet closest to her. The horses were in a long line down the center aisle and the five red-tailed hawks were at the back close to Phil. It was late when the jet finally began to move. As they were taxiing for the runway, she heard a soothing sound of a native American flute playing. She saw that Peggy played the flute while she sat by her brother. Everyone else quietly listened as well. It was a hauntingly beautiful song that gave Solana hope. She rested her head on Shekinah's shoulder and listened to the music until she fell asleep.

*** Section Break ***

Solana woke with cramps that felt like she needed to use the bathroom. The jet was dark and quiet. Solana slowly got up, held her abdomen and walked to the front of jet towards the bathroom. The pumas watched her a moment then laid their heads back down. She got to the

bathroom and sat on the toilet. Oh, great she thought, now I have diarrhea. She felt miserable and was scared she ate something bad. When she was done, she washed her hands and looked in the mirror noticing how messy her hair looked. She tried to smooth it out with her hand but quickly lost patience. She didn't feel very good. She quietly walked back to her spot on the divan. She noticed Jayden was holding Shekinah as they slept and smiled. She decided to check on her mama so she walked to the divan at the very back of the jet and pushed aside the emergency blankets to look in on her mama. She slept soundly with her breathing even. Her arm was back in a normal shape with a cast on it. There was an IV still connected to her arm. Solana lowered the emergency blanket and then checked on Phil and Peggy. They were both sleeping as well. Phil had an IV connected to his arm. Everyone seemed to be resting peacefully as the jet flew to their final destination. Solana sighed and felt happy. They were going to make it. She sat back down in her spot on the divan and leaned against Shekinah and fell back asleep.

She woke up again with the same cramping stomach pains. Ugh, Solana thought and got up to go back to the bathroom. Another bout of diarrhea and Solana flushed the toilet. She must really be sick but hopefully it was just something she ate and not some disease. She left the bathroom, went back to the divan, and tried to sleep. Only her stomach hurt and cramped up, so she couldn't sleep. The cramps seemed to be coming every ten minutes. Soon Solana needed to use the bathroom again. She tried to

keep quiet so she wouldn't wake anyone as she felt embarrassed about having to use the bathroom so much. After the fourth trip to the bathroom, Solana stepped out of the bathroom and was startled to see that Carl watched her.

"You OK? Or do pregnant women really have that small of a bladder?" Carl asked.

"It isn't my bladder. Either I have a bad case of the stomach flu or I'm in labor," Solana said.

"Should I wake up Evaline or someone to help you?" Carl asked worried.

"No, I'm all right for now. I'll wake Evaline if the contractions get closer together."

"OK, good," Carl said sounding relieved and went back into the cockpit.

Solana went back to the divan again and tried to rest. She could no longer sleep so she looked out the window at the stars above them. The cramps kept coming and seemed to be getting closer together. Solana thought about waking up Evaline but she was worried it was false labor. She wished she had a watch to time her contractions, but she guessed they were coming less than ten minutes now. They were getting more painful and she had to blow out nice and slow to try to deal with the pain. As another contraction started, Solana looked up at the ceiling and blew out slowly. It went away and Solana was able to relax once again. She realized

she must really be in labor and decided to wake up Evaline. That's when she realized Skylar was awake and watched her.

"Are you feeling OK?" Skylar asked when she looked at him.

"I know this is terrible timing but I think I'm in labor."

"Really!" Skylar said sitting up straight looking nervous.

"Yes, I'm so sorry. My mom and grandmother were going to deliver the baby," Solana said wanting to say more but she began to feel another contraction building up.

Solana struggled to deal with the increasing pain as the contraction peaked. She breathed out and tried to stay calm like the books told her. She saw Skylar watch her but she had to concentrate on dealing with the pain for the moment. Then slowly the contraction lessened and the pain was gone again.

Skylar reached over and shook Evaline, "Wake up!"

Evaline slowly opened her eyes and struggled to keep them open. She blinked and rubbed them in a vain attempt to wake up. "Wake up Evaline, Solana is having her baby," Skylar blurted.

This made both Evaline and Roth sit up with their eyes wide open.

"What!?" Roth said surprised and sounded slightly confused from sleep.

Evaline looked over at Solana and her eyes relaxed as she saw Solana wasn't very far along, "How far apart are your contractions?"

"I'm not sure maybe seven minutes now," Solana replied.

“When did the contractions start?”

“About two hours ago,” Solana said glancing at Roth and Skylar feeling too embarrassed to talk about the frequent trips to the bathroom in front of everyone.

Solana looked around then wondered where she was going to deliver her baby and wished her grandmamma was there to help her. She never imagined giving birth surrounded by strangers instead of her family.

“Skylar, can you go find a timer in my suitcase please?” Evaline asked Skylar.

“Sure,” Skylar quickly replied and headed towards the back of the jet.

“Has your water broke?”

“No,” Solana said as she was pretty sure her water didn’t break. She heard they could leak out slowly or come out in a gush. Either way she was sure she wasn’t leaking water since her panties were dry. She suddenly wanted her mama and grandmamma to be there for her now.

“My mama and grandmamma were going to deliver the baby but I hoped I would make it to Teal Haven first.”

“Don’t worry Solana, I can help you,” Evaline said which made Solana feel a little better.

Skylar returned and handed Evaline an electronic timer.

“Thank you, Skylar,” Evaline said and smiled at him.

“No problem.”

Solana felt another contraction and began to breathe out nice and easy as she tried to relax through the pain.

“That’s good Solana,” Evaline said as she started the timer and handed it to Solana, “I want you to push this button each time a contraction starts so we can time them. I’m going to go check on your mom and get a few things ready.”

Roth was quiet the whole time and when Evaline got up he quickly stood up too, “Seems like everything is under control, I’m going to go check on Carl.”

Chapter 21

Skylar realized he was staring at Solana while she struggled with pain. Shekinah and Jayden were still sleeping peacefully next to her

“I’m going to get something to eat, do you need anything?” Skylar asked Solana as he felt awkward and wanted an excuse to exit the area.

Solana shook her head no and Skylar wondered if it was a stupid question.

“OK, I’ll leave you be then,” Skylar said and started heading to the galley.

“Wait,” Solana said making Skylar stop and turn back.

“Water, please” Solana struggled to say.

“Sure! I’ll be right back.”

Skylar quickly headed to the galley to get Solana some water. As he filled a cup with water, he wondered if the baby was a boy or girl. He realized it was odd he even cared. He hardly knew this girl yet for some reason he felt so interested in who she was. She was so incredibly beautiful and brave. He thought of how Solana handled the pain of labor so quietly and calm. In fact, he was amazed she didn’t even seem scared because he sure felt nervous about it all. He looked up as Jayden and Shekinah headed in his direction.

“Jayden and I are hungry. Is there any food?” Shekinah asked.

“Sure, there is some in the galley behind me, help yourself.”

Skylar turned his back to the horses to let Shekinah and Jayden squeeze past him. Roth suddenly appeared in the galley, “We will be landing soon so you might want to find a seat in the next few minutes. Can you let the others know?”

“OK will do,” Skylar said as he watched Roth turn and head back into the cockpit.

“We’ll be quick,” Shekinah said as Roth left.

Skylar continued back to Solana and was surprised to see her mother sitting next to her. She looked a tired and pale but stable.

“Here you go Solana,” Skylar said as he handed her the cup of water.

“Thank you,” Solana said and took a small sip of the water. Evaline also sat next to Solana and quickly took the cup from her when she was finished drinking.

Peggy sat on the divan and watched Solana curiously. The jet slowed causing Skylar to grab onto the wall to keep from falling.

“Roth said we’re landing soon,” Skylar said.

Evaline asked, “Skylar, can you help us move Solana to the divan in the back so she can have some more privacy?”

Skylar was about to say sure but Solana quickly replied, “I don’t need help.”

She got up and started to move slowly. Evaline stood up and held onto her arm. After a few short steps, Solana stopped and held onto her abdomen. Skylar quickly got behind her and held onto her other arm.

“A lady needs a handsome man by her side,” Skylar whispered into her ear.

Solana glanced at him and rolled her eyes but accepted his help.

*** Section Break ***

Solana was surprised how difficult it was to walk. In fact, when the contraction started it seemed impossible. Her only choice was to stand and wait for the peak of the pain to subside. Skylar surprised her when he suddenly whispered in her ear. She would have had a sarcastic retort for his audacity except she was in too much pain to talk. She wouldn’t have admitted it but she was grateful he decided to help her. She had to resist the urge to lean back against his warm body for comfort as she felt scared. As they reached the divan, Skylar reached up and pulled the shiny metallic emergency blanket aside so Solana could easily sit down.

“Thank you, Skylar,” Evaline said.

“You’re welcome. Let me know if you need anything,” Skylar said and turned to leave.

Evaline replied, “Skylar, there is one more thing. Can you move that blanket to create a bigger privacy room?”

“Sure thing.”

Solana slowly laid down on her side and rested waiting for the next contraction to begin. She noticed the light in the windows had brightened indicating it was already morning. She could feel the tilt of the jet as they descended and knew they would soon arrive in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. She wondered how can she get to the final location while being in labor? They were so close to the location with only hours before it was too late. She felt another contraction begin so she clicked to start the timer again. Her contractions were four minutes apart now. The pain quickly began to build in intensity which interrupted her thoughts about travelling anywhere.

“How are you holding up, Solana?” Esperanza asked as she sat down on the opposite divan next to Phil and Peggy. Peggy and Phil were both watched. Phil no longer had an IV in his arm and he looked a lot better.

After she blew through the pain, she nodded and then replied, “OK.”

Solana wondered how her mama was as she looked so pale and cradled her arm like a glass baby.

“Don’t you worry about me, Solana. I’m a tough-as-nails farmer’s daughter. Just like you,” Esperanza said and smiled.

Skylar worked quickly as he moved the emergency blanket and duct taped it back up again. This walled off the very back two divans into a private room.

“I’m all done. I’m going to get something to eat now. Good luck,” Skylar said as he quickly turned and left.

Evaline said, “Thanks for your help, Skylar. Peggy, why don’t you help your brother go get something to eat? We’re going to need some privacy for a little while.”

“Aw, I wanted to see the new baby. Can I stay please?” Peggy asked.

“No dear. But when the baby is born I’ll call you to come and see, OK?” Evaline said.

Peggy smiled and nodded. She grabbed Phil’s hand, “Come on Phil.”

Phil got up a little wobbly at first but Peggy helped him stand. Then they left the area too. Solana was grateful to be alone with her mama and Evaline.

“Solana, I need you to lie on your back now, so I can check your dilation to see how you are progressing,” Evaline said.

*** Section Break ***

Good luck? Was that appropriate Skylar wondered. He had no idea what you say to someone about to give birth. Break a leg? He chuckled to himself at that thought and shook his head. He was glad they didn't ask for anything else since the whole child birth thing was too much for him. Hopefully, it won't take too long. He wondered how much longer before they arrived. He glanced out the window and saw that they rapidly approached the ground. Oh, right he was supposed to be sitting now but he doubted it would be a rough landing with Carl flying. Just in case, he hung onto the wall of the jet and watched out the window.

They was a small airport runway in front of them. The jet zipped past a small town next to large hill with ski slopes built into the side. It reminded him of home and he immediately felt homesick. Would he ever see the beautiful Swiss Alps again?

"Is everything OK?" Shekinah asked him.

Skylar glanced over to see Jayden and Shekinah sitting on the floor nearby eating crackers and cheese.

"Yeah, I'm good," Skylar replied and noticed Peggy and Phil approaching.

"It's so exciting that Solana is having her baby! I can't wait to hold the baby," Peggy said as she slowly led Phil towards the galley, "Oh, can we have some crackers and cheese too?"

"Sure Peggy," Shekinah said and patted her hand for Peggy and Phil to come sit by her.

“We are about to land, so better sit quick and brace yourselves,” Skylar said.

The jet landed gently as he expected. There had been no reason for worry but the engine breaks did cause Skylar to hold on a little tighter to the wall. The airport was small and looked deserted. Skylar sighed another damn airport, he felt like he was on a tour of American airports and would be glad to see the last of them. He knew they had to travel northward from the town. It looked like they would be going up into the mountains he was admiring as they landed. He wondered if they had to wait until Solana had her baby. He was so sick of being stuck in airports. Maybe if they could move her to a car and travel slowly. Or maybe they could find something bigger, like a truck. He could even make some kind of bed in the back and carry her if they needed. Then he realized with a panic they might ask him to carry her while she is in labor. No, he definitely didn’t want to do that! It’s better they wait. Solana probably wouldn’t want to be disturbed.

“So, do you know where we need to go now?” Jayden asked.

Skylar replied, “Yeah, I was checking out the map earlier. The coordinates say we need to be just north of town up in the mountains. There are some forest roads we could take if we can find some cars. I’m guessing it’s an hour drive but the horses will slow us down.”

“We have to be there by noon, right?” Jayden asked.

Skylar answered, “Yeah, that’s what the book says. I think we still have plenty of time provided we can head out soon after we land,”

Shekinah blurted, “What if Solana is still in labor? We can’t move her like that!”

Skylar shrugged hoping they would somehow figure out what to do. He decided to sit down and have a few crackers and cheese as well.

Chapter 22

Her contractions came every few minutes now and were so painful. She felt the jet land and the engines shut down but she hardly cared. Another contraction was already building and she was dreaded it. The pain was so intense now she couldn't relax or blow through it like the books told her to do. Instead, she clenched her hands onto the blanket and moaned through the peak of the pain. She returned to short blowing breaths as the pain subsided again. Sweat formed on her forehead and she felt it drip down her back. She wasn't sure she could handle any more pain.

"Solana, you're doing great. It won't be long now," Evaline reassured as Solana's mother wiped a damp cloth across her forehead and brushed her hair to one side.

Solana rested before another contraction built in strength. Not again Solana thought but she said nothing as the pain filled her body and overwhelmed her again. As the pain peaked she felt a slight urge to bear down and push. This felt new and Evaline seemed to notice her slight push as well.

"Do you need to push?" Evaline asked.

As the pain subsided, Solana managed a reply, "Yeah."

"That's good. Solana, I need to check your dilation."

It was uncomfortable but Evaline checked her fast. The pain began to grow again and Solana wished she could stop it from coming back again. But it was like being strapped in a roller coaster ride and there was nothing she could do to stop the ride. She breathed and tried desperately to remain calm.

“You are fully dilated, Solana. Go ahead and start pushing with this contraction.”

As the pain ramped up once again the urge to push returned and her abdomen muscles involuntarily started contracting. Solana didn’t fight the urge and bore down. Much to Solana’s relief, pushing lessened the pain of the contraction. She pushed until the contraction eased off then she rested waiting for the next one.

Suddenly, Tapac the male puma bursted through the emergency blanket to crowd in right next to Solana. Then he hissed towards the front of the jet. It startled Evaline and Esperanza. Evaline fell back away from Solana and Tapac. Another contraction built up rapidly and most of Solana’s consciousness was directed inward. Yet she was still slightly aware of the puma and its distress as it stood next to Solana. She pushed again and this time she felt her baby slowly move down the birth canal. When the contraction subsided, she felt her baby slip slightly back up inside her. With the pain momentarily gone, she realized Yauri had also attempted to crowd in next to her. Evaline tried her best to monitor Solana’s progress but seemed uncomfortable with the pumas so close. Solana also became aware

of how much the pumas were distressed. She had to say something but the pain was quickly ramping up again. Solana breathed out, “Somethin’s wrong!” before the contraction took hold of her strength again. Suddenly, the natural lighting in the jet dimmed and grew dark.

Chapter 23

Skylar, Jayden, Shekinah, Peggy and Phil all quietly ate crackers and cheese. The jet engines had shut down and it was too quiet for Skylar especially since he could hear the quiet moans of Solana. He tried to think of something to talk about when he noticed the pumas get up and looked agitated. Then suddenly they stode still, listened to something and sprinted to the back of the jet, past the emergency blanket. He wondered what was going on and got up to look out the window. His eyes widened as he saw a cloud of insects rapidly approach.

“Oh crap! Scorpion locusts!”

“What!?” Jayden and Shekinah said at once as they scrambled to their feet to look outside.

Peggy and Phil did the same.

Peggy whimpered, “Oh no, no, no. Those things killed my foster parents!”

“What is it?” Walter asked and went to a window as well.

Skylar noticed Carl, Shane and Roth come out of the cockpit and go to the windows as well.

Skylar looked back out his window as the swarm reached the jet and completely covered the windows. The scorpion locust seemed to peer at him right through the window as some of them struck the window with their

stinging tails. Everyone backed away from the windows. The swarm had covered the windows so thickly they darkened the inside of the jet.

“I need to light my lantern!” Peggy said and started to run towards the back of the jet where she left her backpack.

Roth grabbed onto her, “Hold on little lady, we can’t start lighting fires in here.”

Peggy struggled to get free but Roth held her arm firmly.

Peggy shrieked, “They’re going to get in and eat us all!”

“Calm down, they can’t get in,” Roth said. “Everyone, close all of the window covers and maybe they will fly away.”

Peggy seemed to calm down at that idea. Skylar felt freaked out himself and closed his window. As they all closed the window covers, he kept thinking about what Peggy said about her lantern and decided to ask her, “What did you mean you need to light your lantern? Are you afraid of the dark?”

Peggy blurted, “They don’t like it. There were so many of them everywhere! Then our little bird flew to the lantern and we followed it. We tried to light more fires but they didn’t work.”

“Slow down Peggy, can you start from the beginning?” Skylar asked.

After a deep breath, Peggy replied, “When those bugs came, me and my brother tried to hide in the RV. But they found a way in,” Peggy turned to Roth. “Are you sure they can’t get in?”

Skylar reassured, “It’s OK Peggy, this jet is sealed tight. Just tell me what happened,”

“We were waiting in the RV for our foster parents to come back when those bugs came. Our foster parents were walking back and those bugs got them. Phil and I stayed in the RV but it was so dark and we were scared we lit a lantern. After those bugs ate my foster parents they started coming in to the RV to get us too. We had a pet little bird and it flew right to the lantern so we followed it. For some reason, those bugs didn’t like the light from the lantern and stayed away from it. My brother and I stayed close to the lantern. We tried to light another fire but it made the RV too smoky, so we carried the lantern and left the RV. If it wasn’t for my lantern we would be dead too.”

“Do you still have it?” Skylar asked.

“Yes, it’s in my backpack. I’ll go get it!”

“Just don’t light it. We shouldn’t light it inside the jet, OK?”

Peggy nodded and went to get her lantern.

Skylar had made his way to the back of jet as he closed the windows and Evaline popped her head out of the emergency blanket.

Evaline asked, “What’s going on? And can someone get these pumas out of here? Solana is about to have her baby!”

Skylar saw a glance of Solana’s sweaty brow and fear in her eyes before the blanket fell closed again.

Peggy walked up holding her lantern, “This is my lantern but the oil has spilled out and is gone.”

“Hang on Peggy, I need to help Evaline.”

Skylar felt compelled to help and he did have to close the windows so, he pulled the blanket aside. Thankfully, Evaline had a blanket over Solana’s legs. She was blowing short breaths as if trying to blow out a candle. The male puma, Tapac, stood by Solana’s side with his head gently resting by Solana’s side. The female puma, Yauri sat nearby purring. Evaline was focused on Solana and seemed ready to guide the baby’s head out. Solana’s mother, sat near Solana’s head holding her hand as she dabbed Solana’s forehead with a cloth. Skylar was mesmerized for a moment until Solana turned to look at him with a questioning look in her eyes. At once Skylar knew she deserved to know the truth.

“There are scorpion locusts covering the outside of the jet. We hope they will fly away, but I need to close all the window covers.”

Solana nodded and turned back to face her legs and pushed. Skylar had never saw anyone give birth before and thought if he was the baby’s father he would have stayed to comfort Solana. Skylar closed the window covers on one side. Esperanza stood up and closed another one while Evaline quickly shut the last window cover.

“Push nice and easy Solana, I can see the head now,” Evaline said to Solana and then turned to Skylar. “Can you get the pumas out of here?”

After a moment, Solana quit pushing and seemed to rest. Skylar wasn't sure how to get the pumas to move so he carefully put his hands on the male and tried to push him. The puma grunted and resisted being moved.

"Solana, how can I move the pumas?"

Solana didn't look at Skylar she just shook her head no and put her hand on Tapac's head as if to hold onto him.

Skylar looked at Evaline unsure what to do, "I think she wants them to stay."

"Then, let them stay," Esperanza said.

"OK," Skylar replied.

Skylar quickly left and went to find a place to sit down.

Chapter 24

She was glad Skylar and her mother let the pumas stay with her. They made her feel safer. As the pain ramped up again, Solana bore down and pushed. She felt her baby's head slowly move which inspired her continue pushing even as the pain began to subside. Although she did rest a moment to catch her breath.

"You're doing wonderfully Solana. Esperanza would you like to do the honors of catching the baby?"

Esperanza moved over and knelt down to catch the baby.

Evaline explained to Esperanza, "I need to apply pressure on her perineum to slow the baby's head and prevent Solana from tearing. Can you help guide the baby's head out Esperanza?"

Esperanza and Evaline readied themselves for the baby's birth.

Solana felt her contraction build up again. This time, she couldn't stop herself from pushing very hard and as she bore down she felt her baby's head slip out of her. Her baby's body wasn't completely out of her yet so she was about to push more to finish giving birth to her baby when Evaline stopped her.

"Hold on Solana, let us turn your baby's shoulders."

Solana barely felt them maneuvering her baby for second.

"OK, now an easy push," Evaline said.

Solana pushed and felt the rest of her baby easily slipped out of her. The pain was gone instantly and she was filled with joy. Esperanza held up her baby to present to Solana.

“It’s a girl!” Esperanza said as she smiled proudly and handed her granddaughter over to her daughter.

Tapac raised his head to sniff at the baby curiously. Solana eagerly reached out to hold and cuddle her baby against her chest with tears of joy in her eyes. Her little baby was here at last. The umbilical cord was still attached and led down to her insides but she was so happy she didn’t care at all. Her baby was calm and looked right up at her. Her eyes were a bright violet, which surprised Solana so much she gasped.

“What is it, Solana?” Esperanza asked.

“She has purple eyes!” Solana said as she looked up at her mother and Evaline.

Evaline checked the baby’s eyes and replied, “I’ve never seen anything like this but she seems healthy at a glance. I can do a more complete checkup soon enough.”

Tapac and Yauri came closer and Yauri gently licked the baby which made Solana smile. They were both purred happily. Then Solana felt a contraction coming and she made a face.

“Oh, do you feel a contraction coming Solana?” Evaline asked.

Solana nodded and wondered why she was hurting again.

“You’re fine. It’s perfectly normal. You need to push the placenta out now. That’s it, just a small push,” Evaline said.

Solana pushed and felt something much smaller than her baby’s head come out of her. She had read about delivering the placenta but she had forgotten that would happen.

Evaline said to Solana, “I need to tie off the umbilical cord and cut it. Can I hold your baby for a moment Solana?”

Solana was tired and rested her eyes a bit while Evaline and her mother worked. She heard them dip a cloth in a bowl of water to clean her baby. It wasn’t long before they handed her baby back to her all swaddled in the baby blanket her grandmother made. Upon seeing her grandmother’s blanket, tears fell from her eyes. Yet she was also filled with happiness as she held her baby she smiled and cried simultaneously.

Evaline got up, “I’m going to get a bite to eat. Just rest and try feeding your baby.”

Solana looked at her mother and felt a little shy about breast feeding for the first time. Then decided she would rather her mother stay in case she needed help. Solana read in a book about how to breast feed but she wasn’t sure she could do it. She slowly sat up and held her baby to her breast. Amazingly, after only a couple of tries, her baby latched onto her nipple. She felt a tingling warmth fill her breast as the milk flowed. Then a contraction began, which felt almost as painful as labor pains. She looked at her mother who had sat down next to her.

Solana asked her mother, “Is it normal to keep having contractions? They really hurt.”

“Yes, especially while breast feeding. Don’t worry they go away after a few days. They are nature’s way of closing your cervix back to normal.”

Sighing Solana replied, “This is a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

After a little while, her baby finished eating and had fallen asleep in her arms. Evaline came back with Shekinah and Peggy following close behind. Esperanza had laid down on the opposite divan to rest her eyes.

Shekinah smiled at Solana and whispered, “Is it OK if I come in?”

Solana smiled at Shekinah, “Sure.”

“Awe, she is so adorable Solana!” Shekinah said.

“Can I hold her?” Peggy asked.

“Sure.”

“Let me help you Peggy,” Evaline said. “First, sit down on the divan.”

Peggy followed instructions on how to support the baby’s head and smiled ear-to-ear at the little baby in her arms on her lap.

“What is her name?” Peggy asked.

Solana remembered her vision with the tree of life and the constellation Carina and smiled, “Her name is Carina.”

Chapter 25

“How far do we need to travel?” Shane asked no one in particular. “I’m thinking we should head out soon? How dangerous are those insects anyway?”

Skylar replied, “Actually, they’re extremely dangerous. I was stung by one of those in my leg and it wasn’t long before my leg was completely numb and I couldn’t use it. I’m guessing if you get stung by enough of them and you’d be paralyzed.”

Roth peaked out the windows, “We are running out of time but first we need test if Peggy’s lantern works.”

Jayden asked, “So, how long will it take to get where we’re going?”

Carl looked up from the map he was studying, “It looks like it will take us an hour to drive to the coordinates from here.” He glanced at his watch, “It’s 9:05 am, so we have less than three hours to get there. We might have to leave all these animals behind.”

“No, we can’t leave them!” Phil exclaimed.

“Hold on, maybe there is a way we can bring them and still get there on time. How fast can the horses run?” Skylar asked thinking Solana would never leave without them either.

Roth replied, “I don’t know, we should ask Solana or her mother. Skylar why don’t you go talk to them and find out what you can. In the

meantime, it sounds like we need to improvise a few oil-burning lanterns to keep those scorpion locusts at bay."

Skylar turned and headed to the back of the jet. He paused at the blanket, "May I come in?"

"Yes, you can come in," Solana said.

Skylar pulled the blanket aside and stepped in. There was no room for him with the two pumas lying on the floor and all the seats taken. Esperanza, Shekinah and Evaline were all on the divan across from Solana. Peggy sat next to Solana. Solana was holding her baby and watching Skylar. Thinking it rude not to pay some attention to the new baby, he looked down at her. The baby appeared to be sleeping peacefully in her arms.

"She is beautiful like her mother."

"Thank you." Solana said and smiled.

Solana's smile lit up her face and Skylar had a sudden urge to kiss her. He wanted to lean in close and gently brush his lips against hers then slowly deepen his kiss.

"Did you want something?"

Skylar realized he was staring at her lips then and quickly looked back to her eyes, "Yes, um we were wondering if, I mean how fast can your horses run?"

Skylar noticed Solana blushed and quickly looked down at her baby before she replied, "They are pretty fast, why?"

Skylar regained his composure and thoughts, “It’s already after 9 am and it takes at least an hour to drive to the coordinates. We’re hoping the horses can travel fast enough.”

“How many miles is it?” Esperanza asked.

“About 22 miles but it’s all uphill on rough forest roads.”

“Without riders, the horses can fast trot that distance,” Esperanza said.

“How long do you think it would take them to cover the distance?”

“They should be able to do it in about an hour and a half.”

Skylar sighed out of relief, “We can do this! We just need to find some cars or something we can all travel in and leave before ten thirty.” Skylar looked at Evaline and continued, “Will Solana be all right to travel?”

“I’ll have to be, won’t I?” Solana answered before Evaline could reply.

Skylar looked back at Solana who looked determined to be strong although he thought she looked a little pale. He decided disagreeing with her would be a fast way to get on her bad side.

“Great! I’ll go get ready,” Skylar said and turned to leave.

“Wait, what about those bugs?” Peggy asked.

“Some of them are flying away and we’re trying to make some more lanterns. Do you want to help?”

“Sure!” Peggy said and got up and followed Skylar out of the privacy room.

“I might as well do something useful too,” Shekinah said and left.

“I will help too,” Evaline said and got up and left.

Skylar turned back before he left and said to Solana, “I have something I’d like to give you Solana. I’ll be right back.”

Section Break

Skylar came right back and he held something in his hand. Solana watched him approach and wondered what he was going to give her.

“I found this in Switzerland, where I’m from it’s traditional to give new mothers a gift,” Skylar said as he handed Solana a golden necklace with a sun-shaped pendant.

Solana was completely surprised as she didn’t expect anything of such beauty and value. The yellow-fire gemstone in the center of the sun pendant glowed softly and the fire in the center of the gemstone danced as if it was a real fire that was captured inside. It looked so real she was almost afraid it would burn her if she touched it yet Skylar held it in his hand with no trouble. She wasn’t sure she could even accept such a gift but couldn’t resist so she reached out and took the necklace to look at it closer. The sun rays appeared to be diamonds in groups of three and were smaller as they radiated out from the sun’s center gemstone.

“Skylar this is incredible! I can’t accept a gift like this,” Solana said and tried to hand the necklace back.

Skylar quickly withdrew his hand and then placed it on her cheek to gently raise her eyes to his, “You’re beautiful Solana, this necklace was meant to be worn by you. I’m not asking or expecting anything in return,” and he dropped his hand and looked away for a second and continued, “Besides it doesn’t look very good on me.”

Solana chuckled at the thought of Skylar wearing it.

“Here, let me help you,” Skylar gently took the necklace from Solana’s hand and wrapped it around her neck. She decided to accept his gift and held her hair aside while he connected the clasp.

“Thank you,” Solana said and smiled.

“You’re welcome. I better go help get ready to leave,” Skylar said as he turned and left.

“He sure is smitten with you Solana,” Esperanza said and smiled at Solana.

Solana smiled and blushed, “You think so?” He’s so cute and seemed so athletic and exciting. Yet, Solana was afraid he was just being nice. He seemed like a guy who would flirt with all the girls but never be in a steady relationship. She should probably guard her feelings about him or she might end up hurt.

“Solana, I see your concerns on your face. That boy does seem like a Casanova type but so was your father. Your father was so good with women

but when it came to me he stumbled over his words. I see Skylar doing the exact same thing when he looks at you," Esperanza said in hushed tones.

"Really, Papa was like that?" Solana asked and felt a little hope return.

"Oh yes he was. I think you should give Skylar a chance before you strike him down. Just wait and see what he will do. Anyway, to change the subject, I was wondering if you still have those moon shoes?"

"Yes, it's a miracle I was able to keep them through everything we have been through. They're in a dry bag on the floor back there. Why? Oh, right! I should wear them."

"Exactly, it will help make it easier to walk so soon after birth. I'll get them." Esperanza said.

Solana gazed at her little baby girl and smiled. It was so hard to believe she was a mother now and this was her daughter. She was sleeping so good already too. Maybe she will be an easy going baby.

"Here they are. It looks like you cleaned up all that mud too," Esperanza said.

"Someone else cleaned them. A girl I met in Machu Picchu took them and said she was going to clean them. I thought I'd never see them again but in the end she gave them back."

"You're in luck then. Here, I'll put them on your feet for you. I know how sore everything feels after your first baby. Just move slowly for now but don't worry you'll be feeling much better in a few days."

Chapter 26

Roth asked, “Are there no glass jars anywhere on this jet?”

Shekinah replied, “No, we tore this place apart and Jayden and I couldn’t find anything. I’m sorry.”

Everyone else shrugged and shook their head no. All they could find was plastic or cardboard containers. Nothing that they could use to improvise a lantern. They just don’t make things out of glass anymore. Skylar wondered how they were going to improvise a lantern. He thought Roth would have some cool ideas but apparently it wasn’t going to work out this time. They did find some olive oil for Peggy’s lantern.

“With only one lantern, we will have to change our plans,” Roth said. “Peggy, would it be all right if I use your lantern to go get help? I’m thinking Walter and I go to the meeting place and see if those people can help us. What do you think Walter? You up for some fun?”

“Ha! Fun you say?” Walter sighed heavily, “Yeah, what the hell!”

“What do you say Peggy? Can we borrow you lantern? I’ll give it back,”

“Are you sure? You’ll come back right?” Peggy nervously.

Roth reassured her, “I promise, I’ll be back to get you.”

Skylar wanted to go and almost interrupted but then decided that Roth wanted Walter with him for a reason so he decided not to say anything.

Roth commanded, “The rest of you should find something to swat those locusts if any of them get in when we open the door.”

“Oh shit! Right we will need something,” Skylar responded as he felt a rush of nerves. His sudden fear response made him really glad he wasn’t going out there.

Walter and Roth loaded their guns and added few layers of clothing to guard against getting stung. They immediately began to sweat in the heat. Skylar wasn’t sure adding clothes was a great idea as the jet heated up with the sun up. However, he figured it might help keep the stingers from getting to their skin so he supposed it was worth it.

Roth continued, “Everyone should cover as much bare skin as possible. Just in case some of those locusts get in here,” Roth said. “Peggy and Phil can you go in the back with Solana? I want all of you to hide under blankets like a tent. OK?”

Phil was already near the back and looked like he was admiring the hawks. Skylar wondered if the animals would be safe. It seemed like the horses would be the most vulnerable. If only they had enough blankets to cover them as well.

Roth said to his wife as he pulled her close, “Evaline, honey, why don’t you check on Solana and the baby. I think we have enough bug swatters up here.”

“Please, be careful my love.”

“You know I always am,” Roth replied and kissed her.

Seeing their usually private affections made Skylar worry even more. Evaline left and everyone added layers of extra clothes. Skylar found two fly swatters and gave one to Jayden and one to Shekinah. He took off his shoe, which was the next best thing he had for smashing locusts. Carl and Shane improvised cardboard clubs wrapped in duct tape. They were ready.

Roth lit the lantern and Walter slowly opened the door just a crack. Immediately, two locusts flew in and Walter ducked then slammed the door shut again. The first locust veered away from the lantern and directly at Carl.

“Shit!” Carl swung the fly swatter and hit the locust, it was flung towards the jet wall. It slammed into the wall and fell to the floor dead.

The second locust flew between Skylar and Shane but it was fast enough that both of them missed it. They looked at each other and turned to go after it. The locust landed on the jet wall on the opposite side. Shane and Skylar rushed to smash it before it took off again. Shane backed off at the last second and Skylar used his shoe to smash it against the jet. Jayden and Shekinah were ready but greatly relieved no more locusts came through.

Walter blurted, “Well, that turned out to be bullshit!”

Roth replied, “Hold on Walter, I think the lantern needs to be closer to the door. If it didn’t work at all we would’ve had a lot more the two locusts in here. Let’s try it again.”

“If you say so,” Walter said and grabbed onto the door. “You ready, Roth?”

Roth crowded in close and nodded. Slowly the door cracked open just a sliver at first. Nothing came in so Walter pushed it open further. Skylar saw through the opening and it looked like the locusts were flying around the door but not at it. Reluctantly, Walter opened the door further and further until there was enough room for them to walk out. Walter carried a shotgun but it hardly seemed like that would help against a swarm of locusts. Roth carried his rifle in one hand and the lantern in the other. Roth stepped out onto the stairs of the jet with Walter directly behind him. The locusts swarmed around them but kept their distance as if an invisible force field was around them.

“Skylar you need to close the door as soon as we get off the steps,” Roth shouted over the noise of the locust.

The buzzing noise was much louder with the door opened. Skylar realized the locust were not gone but spread out over the area. However, now they seemed to be all coming toward them and thickening the cloud of locusts. Skylar quickly reached out and grabbed the handle to lift the door/stairway and nodded to Roth he was ready.

The noise upset the horses and Skylar heard them stomptheir hooves and neigh. A hawk screeched and flew about inside the jet but most of his attention was focused on closing the door. As soon as Roth and Walter stepped off the stairs he pulled with all his might and slammed the door shut. One locust made an attempt to fly in but was smashed in the doorway. Skylar sealed the door and went to look out the window. The hawks were still flying about so Peggy and Phil came out of the back room and tried to settle them. Skylar watched Roth and Walter move away from the jet towards some parked cars near the terminal. The locusts created a swarming ball around them. If they made it to the cars everything will be fine. Provided they have fuel and well he was pretty sure one of them could hot wire a car. He figured Roth would have thought of that. In fact, it's probably why he asked Walter to go with him. They stopped and looked around but Skylar couldn't see why they stopped. What are they doing he wondered? Did they get stung? Was the lantern going out? They started to move back to the jet. Skylar switched windows but couldn't see why they headed back. They seemed to move faster this time. Then he heard a new sound or rather he felt it. A deep yet distance rumble like an earthquake or thunder. They began to run and the dome of insects around them stretched out like a teardrop.

"They're coming back! Get ready, I have to open the door," Skylar shouted unnecessarily as everyone except Solana stared out the windows.

"What is that noise?" Peggy shouted as the rumbling grew louder.

“Oh my God!” Skylar exclaimed as he realized what it was, “Hurry and hide, I’m opening the door,” yelled Skylar.

Evaline shouted, “Oh no, not the cattle! Open the door Skylar! Get them back inside!”

Esperanza grabbed Phil’s hand and said, “Quickly, children, we need to hide!”

As soon as Roth and Walter were close enough he opened the door, but this time a bunch of locusts came flying in and Skylar dodged and swatted at them as he opened the door. The hawks were flying again and one hawk flew by Skylar and snatched a locust out of the air. He couldn’t believe it, the hawks were attacking the locusts. As soon as the stairway hit the ground, Roth and Walter bounded up the stairs. Just as Roth entered the jet, the jet was hit with a loud jarring bang that knocked Skylar into the side of the jet. Roth managed to grab onto the door frame but Walter flew back down the stairs and landed on his back on the cement.

“No!” Roth shouted as Walter was swarmed by the locusts. Roth threw his gun down and ran out to him with the lantern, which made the locusts fly back. Walter wasn’t getting up so, Roth grabbed the back of Walter’s shirt and drug him up the stairs.

A few more locusts flew in while Roth pulled Walter, but Jayden, Shekinah, Carl, Shane and the hawks made quick work of them. Evaline joined them with her shoe held high ready to attack. Skylar went down to help Roth and grabbed hold of Walter. Walter had sting marks all over his

face and neck. His eyes were swollen shut and Skylar wasn't sure if he was breathing. The brimstone cattle smashed into the jet again and Skylar was knocked forward toppling over Walter but Roth snatched onto the back of his shirt stopping him. Since both Roth and Skylar let go of Walter, he slid back down the stairs. Skylar looked up and through the thick swarm of locusts he saw the herd of brimstone cattle move quickly towards Walter. Roth yanked hard on Skylar's shirt flinging him into the jet. Skylar landed on his butt at the top of the stairway just as a large brimstone bull slammed into the stairs. Roth had braced himself and somehow managed to hang on to the railing. The bull had hit so hard that he stood dazed by the dented stairs. He was a large red longhorn bull and he had some red-orange spines growing up out of its back. It was almost dinosaur-like in the way it had mutated. Other brimstone cattle rushed up with hunger in their blood-red eyes. They were on Walter before Roth could do anything about it. Roth scrambled up the stairs still clinging to the lantern but the bull charged forward and bit onto Roth's leg. Roth kicked at it and hung onto the railing as the bull yanked. Skylar grabbed onto Roth but blood poured from Roth's leg. Roth screamed from the pain.

"No!!!" screamed Evaline. Carl stopped her from rushing to help her husband.

Another cattle came up from the other side and bit into Roth's hand that held the railing and severed his fingers. At nearly the same time the bull that held Roth's leg twisted his head sideways yanking Roth from

Skylar's grip. He was pulled away and into the herd. No! Skylar couldn't believe it! How could he have lost his grip. A brimstone cattle snapped at his feet and Skylar scrambled back into the jet. He saw the lantern on the stairs and knew Roth had set it down instead of taking it with him. He grabbed the lantern and while brimstone cattle were distracted with the battle over Walter and Roth, he was able to pull the door closed. Just before he shut the door, Skylar saw a hawk fly over his head and out of the jet. He hesitated a moment but the hawk disappeared beyond the swarm and was gone. The door was badly dented and left a gaping hole on one side. With the lantern close to the door, the locusts were kept at bay but the oil was running low already. Evaline was hysterical and beat her fists against Carl's chest and sobbed. Carl grabbed her arms and held onto her while she sobbed.

"We need to get the hell out of here!" Shane exclaimed looking pale.

Skylar thought he was right but didn't reply. Jayden held Shekinah and for a moment he worried she might have gotten stung.

"Are all the locusts dead? Did anyone get stung?" Skylar asked.

Jayden shook his head no, "I think we killed them all but so many got in."

Skylar noticed the horses were agitated but seemed fine. Strange that they didn't get stung. Maybe they preferred humans instead? Evaline let go of Carl and sat down on a nearby divan and wiped the tears from her face. The jet was hit again with a large bang near the doorway. Skylar looked out

the window and saw that the longhorn stood nearby and looked up at him, then it lowered its head and charged again.

“Hold on!” Skylar said as the jet was hit again even harder this time.

The horses made a loud distressed roaring sound. The four remaining hawks were flying again and the pumas hissed loudly from the back of the jet. The jet was stuck again from the other side.

Carl exclaimed, “The animal noises are encouraging the cattle to attack! We won’t last long like this.”

Skylar looked at the animals wondering what to do. They were scared. He was scared but we couldn’t give up yet.

Skylar said as he decided to take charge, “Jayden, grab some duct tape from the galley and try to seal the door before we run out of oil.”

“I’ll help you Jayden,” Shekinah said.

“Carl, can you try to move the jet away from the herd and fly out of here?”

Carl asked, “Are we giving up on the supposed safe place to live then?”

“How good are you at crash landing?”

“No, no way can we survive a landing on those mountains. Based on the map, there isn’t a large enough area to land a jet this size.”

Skylar replied, “Well, then it seems we have to give up on it and try to get out of here alive. Just try to get us airborne and we’ll figure out where to go later. I’m going to check on the others and give them the bad news.”

“All right, I’ll have to fly low with the door breached because we won’t be able to maintain cabin pressure,” Carl said.

“Do what you must, let’s just get out of here,” Skylar said and headed to the back of the jet. He was determined to maintain a cool head. No one else was dying if he could help it!

Chapter 27

Solana watched out the window while holding Carina close. She was terrified and felt so vulnerable. The screaming and noises she heard made it all the worse. Her mother sat on the divan next to Solana and prayed with all her might. Tears rolled down her mother's face when the monster cattle rammed into the jet. Solana knew her mother wasn't very religious but understood her need to pray. Solana felt the same way. She leaned against her mother to try to feel safer. Her mother rested her head onto Solana's head. Suddenly, one of the scorpion locusts flew into their area and headed right at them. Solana backed up instinctively as it seemed to be heading right for her face. Tapac quickly stood up and snapped his jaws onto it then immediately spit it out and made some terrible yowling noises as he complained loudly about it. The horses were going mad, as they stomped and roared their unhappiness. Solana started to get up to try and help but her mother clung tightly to her arm and wouldn't let her leave. Solana decided to stay because her mother needed her more than ever. Plus, she hadn't tried walking since her baby was born and wasn't sure how well she would do. Then she heard Evaline sobbing loudly and could only guess what had happened. Phil and Peggy clung to each other and stared out the windows. Evaline's sobbing started to quiet some and then Solana heard someone approach.

“Can I come in?” Skylar said just outside the blanket.

“Yes,” Solana replied anxious to find out what was happening.

Skylar held the blanket aside but didn’t try to enter. Skylar hesitated as if trying to decide what to say when the jet engines started up.

“Skylar what’s going on?” Solana said anxious about the jet engines, “Are we leaving?!”

“Solana, I’m sorry. We can’t get to the destination.”

“What! No, we have to. We can’t give up.”

Skylar snapped then seemed to regret it, “I don’t want to give up but we have no choice. We’re surrounded by scorpion locusts and brimstone cattle. They just killed Walter and Roth!”

Solana felt terrible. She didn’t know. Skylar looked away for a second trying to regain his composure.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“I’m out of ideas Solana. Carl can’t land on the mountains. I don’t know why the meeting place had to be so hard to get to.”

“Maybe they can come and help us,” Peggy said.

“Roth was going to go get help, but,” Skylar hesitated seemingly to keep his emotions calm, “but that didn’t work. We have no way to contact them so all I want to do now is get us away from these creatures. Maybe we can come back and see if they left any clues as to where they went. There still might be hope but we have to stay alive.”

Solana realized he was right and replied, “OK, I guess there is nothing else we can do.”

Solana felt the jet begin to move. She looked out the window and so did everyone else. The cattle moved alongside with them. The swarm of locusts flew about randomly.

“What are those things? Those monstrous cattle?” Solana asked.

“I think they were regular cattle that mutated. I saw some in Switzerland too. Their skin is so thick and toughened that most of our bullets ricochet right off. They look like demons so we started calling them brimstone cattle.”

“This is the work of the devil!” Esperanza said.

Peggy added, “I don’t like them! They’re disgusting,”

“There’s so many,” Phil said as he looked out a window.

Peggy asked, “What if they attacked those people we are supposed to meet?”

Solana replied to reassure her,“I’m sure they’re all right, Peggy.”

Although Solana hadn’t thought about that. What if there was no one left in the meeting place. Or maybe they had to abandon the location and go somewhere else? Surely, they would have left a note. The jet began to pick up speed and the cattle had to trot to keep up. Soon they would leave those hellish creatures behind but where will they go?

Suddenly, the jet lurched forward with a loud bang and fell a few feet. They hit the ground hard. The jet rolled to one side, breaking off the tip of

the wing then rolled back upright as the belly of the jet screeched across the pavement. Skylar fell forward and let go of the blanket obscuring Solana's view of him. At the same time there was a loud cacophony of screams, roars, and shrieks from all the jet's inhabitants. Carina was startled awake and also screamed.

"Skylar!" Solana shouted hoping he wasn't hurt as she instinctively bounced Carina to calm her.

"I'm OK," Skylar shouted and he stood back up and moved the blanket aside.

The jet quickly stopped sliding since they hadn't yet gained much speed. Then the cattle attacked the jet again with loud jarring hits. Peggy screamed and Phil covered his ears.

Jayden yelled from the front of the jet, "Did you see that? That big red bull pushed one of the cows right under the jet!"

Skylar turned and left.

"Oh my god, they're making the crack bigger!" Shekinah shouted.

Solana thought the hits were coming from all over the jet but if they were smart enough to keep hitting the same spot they might get in. She looked out the window and saw they had moved away from most of the locusts but they would soon catch up to them again. The brimstone cattle surrounded the jet and they looked so determined and blood thirsty almost like a pack of wild wolves. She was so scared but she needed to do something. So, she decided to try to get up in case they needed to run.

Peggy stopped screaming even though the cattle still banged relentlessly into the jet. She looked petrified, and breathed heavily. Phil seemed calmer and put a hand on his sister's shoulder to comfort her. Solana didn't know what they could do. If those cattle break open the jet the locust would get in. Solana gathered Carina close to her chest. Carina was still crying but not as fiercely. Her mother had resumed praying intensely.

"Come on, we need to get closer to the lantern," Solana said.

Solana found she was sore but could walk all right except when the jet was hit again. Her mother held onto her and they helped keep each other standing. Solana glanced back and saw Phil and Peggy doing the same. The puma's weaved their way forward between the horses. The horses frantically stomped and pranced. Solana wished she could calm the horses but found she had no calm thoughts to offer. In fact, she realized she was so fearful it was probably not helping.

"Go back, it's not safe up here!" Skylar shouted as soon as he saw them approach.

Peggy yelled, "We need to be close to the lantern!"

Shekinah held the lantern and beckoned Solana to her then she seemed to decide to move to Solana as well. The jet was hit hard again with a wrenching sound of metal tearing. The jet was shoved all over the place with every hit. Skylar, Carl, Shane, Evaline and Jayden pointed their guns towards the enlarged crack by the door. Evaline looked like an angry woman bent on revenge. The others looked determined but also scared.

Solana looked out the window and saw a large red bull charging full speed towards the crack in the jet. At the same time, another bull rammed into the jet on the opposite side. The force of both bulls hitting at the same time caused the red bull's horns to push through the jet. The red bull became enraged when he realized he was stuck in the jet. He thrashed and shoved, and the jet screeched across the pavement. Evaline started to shoot and pierced more holes in the jet. Shane joined her but Skylar and Jayden looked at Carl who wasn't shooting. The horses roared in fear and managed to jam themselves further into the jet.

"Stop shooting!" Carl shouted.

Solana saw that the side of the jet was weakened and the holes weren't helping. Evaline was so enraged Solana didn't think she could stop herself. The bull on the other side hit the jet again and at the same time the red bull pushed harder. The extra force pushed his horns further into jet. Then he twisted and pulled and a section of the jet was torn asunder. Carl, Skylar and Jayden shot their guns along with Shane and Evaline. Phil and Peggy hid behind Solana and she could hear that Peggy was screaming. A few locusts flew in through the opening but they quickly veered away from the lantern's light. One flew at Carl who stopped shooting to swat at it. He moved his body in a crazy dance to avoid it. Shekinah tried to hold the lantern out closer to him but then more locusts few into the jet so she moved the lantern back in the direction of the opening.

Solana watched the locusts fly into the jet and saw Yauri pounce at a locust and smashed it with her large paws. Then the red bull smashed into the jet again and forced its head further inside the jet. It was being hit by bullets and blood dripped from various bullet wounds on its face but it didn't stop. It stretched out its neck and opened its mouth to expose its sharp fangs as it bit onto Carl's leg. It yanked back with such force that Carl fell and drug across the floor. Carl managed to grab onto the opening of jet and hang on. Shane and Skylar quickly grabbed onto Carl and pulled. Solana watched in horror as Carl's expression went from fear to shock as his body was shredded by the cattle outside. Shane let go of Carl, backed up and raised his rifle. Skylar saw what he was about to do and got out of the way just before Shane shot Carl in the head. The rest of Carl was pulled out of the jet.

Everyone backed up further but more locusts came in and forced Shekinah to move forward again while she shakily held the lantern out as far as she could. This stopped the locusts from coming in but many flew around inside. Evaline suddenly screamed in anger and stomped forward towards the opening, and fired her gun like a madwoman. Skylar stopped reloading his weapon and reached out to grab her arm but Evaline pushed past Skylar.No one else could shoot their gun as she as in the way.

"Evaline, no! Get back!" Skylar said.

She ignored him as the red bull tried to reach in and grab her. Evaline placed her gun in its mouth.

“Eat this!” Evaline screamed as she pulled the trigger.

Blood splashed outward and Solana quickly looked away and shielded Carina but she was sure some of it got on her face. The bull fell over dead.

“Mother-fuckers!” Evaline screamed at them.

The cattle outside the jet yanked the dead bull out of the jet. With the opening clear, a cow pushed her head in to snap at Evaline who stepped back to avoid its sharp teeth.

Then she lowered her gun at the cow and stepped forward. “Come on,” Evaline taunted.

It took the bait and she shoved her rifle in its mouth.

“Watch out!” Skylar shouted.

Another cow squeezed in and grabbed one of Evaline’s legs just before she pulled the trigger. Solana was shocked at how fast Evaline was pulled out of the jet and was gone. She could hear her screams and her gun firing. A bullet hit Jayden in the arm and he yelled out in pain and dropped his gun.

“Jayden!” Shekinah screamed.

Skylar and Shane were still firing out the opening in vain. Jayden held onto his arm and tried to stop the blood. Terror filled Solana. She didn’t want to die. She wanted to run and started to back away but then she saw several locusts flying nearby. As soon as she was too far from the lantern, they headed towards her. Solana quickly went back by Shekinah. The locusts veered away. The hawks flew through the jet and killed locusts but

more of them kept sneaking in past the lantern light. The jet suddenly shook again from the bull on the other side of the jet ramming it again. The pumas growled angrily at the cattle but they seemed to fear them and kept back. The horses stomped and bit at the locusts but the locusts ignored them as they tried to avoid the hawks. Suddenly, another bull with longhorns rammed into the opening enlarging the hole further. It pushed its way into the jet and flicked its horns hitting Shane. It's horns tore across his stomach and knocked him back. Then it turned and looked straight at the huddle Solana, Shekinah, Esperanza, Peggy and Phil made. It lunged teeth first at them.

"No!" Esperanza shouted and stepped in front of Shekinah and Solana.

Solana's mother raised her cast to block as the bull bit down on it with a cracking sound. Solana and Shekinah both grabbed onto Esperanza as the bull yanked. It pulled them all forward as they screamed. Skylar was having trouble getting a shot in as he was afraid to hit one of the them. Solana wasn't going to let her mother go but they were all being pulled closer to the opening. Another cow eagerly pushed its way in beside the bull. Suddenly, Tapac launched himself onto the head of the bull and bit furiously. The bull let go of Esperanza and the group nearly fell backwards. Yauri joined in the attack, as she bit and clawed at the bull. The bull and the cow moved back out of the jet. The pumas let go of the bull and stayed inside the jet and paced at the opening.

“Moooragg!” the bull sounded angrily at the pumas.

Loud and deep gun shots sounded from outside the jet. Then Solana realized she was also hearing the sound of a large helicopter. She looked out and saw two Chinook helicopters headed their way as they shot at the cattle. It sounded like 50 caliper guns and those bullets were ripped the cattle to pieces. Solana heard herself cheer and realized they all were! She never thought she would feel such joy at seeing the United States military. She realized she was crying and laughing as the remaining brimstone cattle started to run. The locusts were blown away from the force of the helicopter winds. Some of them blew into the jet but everyone quickly smashed them. That’s when Solana noticed Shane was still lying on the floor. To her horror she saw his guts had spilled out and he was dead. Skylar followed her gaze and heaved nearly throwing up at the sight. Solana had to look away as she too felt nauseous. She glanced at Jayden and saw that he was tying a piece of cloth around his injured arm.

The helicopters landed nearby and several men got out carrying large guns. A man with all white hair, who looked to be their leader stepped off the helicopter. He quickly approached them and then hesitated when he saw the agitated pumas that guarded the opening.

“Come here. It’s all right,” Solana said to the pumas and visualized them by her side. They moved back then seemingly happy to get away from the noise of the helicopters.

“Solana Gonzales?” the leader with the white hair shouted as he climbed inside through the torn opening in the jet.

“Yes,” Solana said and stepped forward.

Solana realized the man had white hair because he was an albino. His eyebrows were all white and his skin pale. He looked to be around 55 years old Solana thought.

“Welcome to the United States! I’m Captain Joshua Palmer,” Joshua said and held out his hand to shake.

Solana remembered his name from the book of the Teal haven people. She reached out with her trembling hand and shook his hand. She was so happy to see him but her shock and exhaustion kept her from saying anything. Carina was still cried loudly, which didn’t help her nerves. She bounced Carina although she knew she was not likely to calm her down.

“Can I scan your key real quick?” Joshua said,

Solana nodded and offered her right-hand thumb.

Joshua pulled a scanning device off his belt and scanned her thumb. Read the device and nodded.

“You check out, Solana. Congratulations!” Joshua shouted. Then he asked, “Is there a Phil here?”

Solana nodded and turned back to look at Phil who clung to his sister.

Joshua bent down and said loudly, “We have your hawk. Nice job sending a note for help!” He patted Phil’s head.

“I helped him write the note,” Peggy said.

“Excellent work young lady,” Joshua said bowing slightly.

Peggy beamed with pride and turned to pat her brother as well. Solana was instantly grateful for them and would be forever in their debt for saving them all. She realized then that Phil must be able to speak with animals the same way she could. She wanted to ask him more about it but she had no strength left. She could barely keep herself from collapsing on the floor.

“All right, let’s get everyone loaded up in those helicopters,” Joshua said and signaled his men. “We’ll need to collect your guns for safe keeping.”

Skylar handed over his gun and helped open what was left of the jet door to make the opening wider. No one hesitated to cooperate since they were so happy to be alive. Solana noticed her mother was on the verge of collapsing then, and saw that the cast on her arm was badly crushed and blood dripped from it.

“Mama!” Solana said as she tried to hold her mother up. Joshua noticed and hollered for some men to come get her. They carried her to the helicopter.

The pumas were still too agitated to be approached by strangers.

“I can hold Carina for you Solana while you get the pumas,” Shekinah said.

“Thank you,” Solana said and carefully handed her daughter over.

It took some effort but somehow they managed to get everyone and all the animals into those helicopters. The hawks had to be put in burlap bags to keep them from accidently flying into the helicopter blades. Phil wasn't happy but he seemed to understand. The horses were so jammed into the jet it was difficult to get them untangled and backed up out of the jet. But once they were out of the jet, the horses cooperated with the soldiers who led them into the helicopters. Amazingly, none of them were hurt. Solana made sure they got the dry bag of seeds and her personal belongings. Peggy also had her backpack on her back before they left.

When the helicopters lifted in the air, Phil and Peggy were all smiles as if getting a ride in a helicopter made up for all that horror. Carina still cried so hard that Solana had to give up modesty and breast feed her. Skylar watched for a second then quickly glanced away. She was so utterly exhausted she decided it didn't matter if he saw her or not. Her mother was strapped into a gurney with her eyes closed since they had given her a strong shot of pain killers. Jayden's arm was bandaged properly now and he sat next to Shekinah and held her tightly. The pumas laid on the floor by Solana's feet. Sunflower was in this helicopter along with Grey Star. When she looked at her horse, it made her heart ache for her father. She couldn't stop the tears from falling but she wasn't ready to give in fully to her pain so, Solana tried not to think about it. She looked down at her baby and watched her suckle and whispered, "We made it, Carina. We made it."

Chapter 28

Skylar watched out the window as they flew over Steamboat Springs and up into the mountains behind it. He felt numb with shock from it all but also curious where they were taking them. He wasn't sure he could trust them but knew they had no other choice. He didn't realize the Teal Haven lottery was run by the United States military! His father and friends would have had no chance to stand up against them. But his father would have known that as soon as he found out. He only wished his father could be there with him too.

The helicopter began to descend and Skylar saw large cargo bay doors set in the ground. The bay doors opened as they approached. Oh no, Skylar thought, it's an underground shelter. He felt depressed until he remembered this was just a meeting place and they were supposed to leave. Skylar sighed with relief. It is going to be all right he told himself as the helicopter went through the doors. The room opened up into a huge hangar. Parked inside the hangar were very large silver aircrafts like nothing he had ever seen before. They were much bigger than a typical passenger jet. In addition, they had a wider passenger areas that seemed to extend out over the wingspan, yet it still looked aerodynamic. He thought they looked more like some kind of alien spaceship than jets. He counted five of them! Surely that is what they would ride in when they left. Skylar was excited about the

idea of seeing the insides of one of those aircraft. He took a quick glance at Solana and saw she was finished feeding her baby and also looked out the window. He wondered if she was as impressed as he was.

They landed and everyone got off the helicopter. There were soldiers and people in regular clothes that all rushed to various places or carried things into the large aircrafts. Everyone got out of the helicopters as soon as they landed.

“We need to get everyone checked in. Solana, we’re taking your mother to sick bay, she will be well taken care of,” Joshua said to them then turned toward Jayden. “Jayden would you like to go to sick bay and have the doctor look at your arm?”

“No sir, I’m fine. The bullet went through clean. It’s just a flesh wound,” Jayden replied trying to look tough.

Skylar knew his arm had to be killing him. But he figured if he wanted to play it up as a tough guy.

“My men will see to cataloging and checking your animals. Did you bring any plants or seeds?”

“Yes, we did! I have a bunch of seeds in my bag but I left it in the helicopter.”

“Great, I’ll have someone get the seeds. We’ll move your personal belongings into your quarters on one of the ships as soon as it’s assigned.”

“I have some seeds too!” Peggy said as she stepped forward and took off her backpack and unzipped it.

She handed a small bag of seed packets to Joshua.

“Very good. We will count these as well.”

Joshua waved one of his men over and said, “See to it these seeds get added to Solana’s family.”

“Yes sir!” the soldier said and carried the seeds away.

“Good, now everyone please follow me,” Joshua said.

They followed him to a doorway off to the side. All of the soldiers saluted the Captain with utmost urgency as he passed. The door opened into a meeting room with a long wooden table and leather cushioned seats all around. Skylar glanced at Solana and noticed the pumas still followed her. This should be interesting he thought. She is already breaking the rules. He smiled and chuckled quietly. Joshua noticed as well.

“Solana, after we get you checked in, I’ll show you where to take those cougars. We have quarters designed for the animals.”

“All right,” Solana said sounding concerned about her animals. “Sir, er Captain, can I ask where Teal Haven is and what kind of place is it?”

“Teal Haven isn’t a place, it’s a military code name for this project. An operation that started many years ago when U.S. intelligence suspected upcoming changes to Earth would make it inhospitable to humans. You’ll learn that and more in the introductory meeting for all the families. Have a seat and I’ll send in our registrar.” Joshua told her and left.

Skylar quickly pulled out a seat for Solana and she smiled gratefully. Then he sat next to her. Shekinah and Jayden sat in chairs across the table

from them. Peggy sat beside Solana and Phil next to Peggy. Then the door opened and a middle-aged Caucasian woman with dark hair entered the meeting room. She was wearing glasses and holding a tablet.

“First, let me say welcome. My name is Sarah. You’re the last family to arrive and we very nearly began preparations to leave. At that point, it would have been too late. You should thank the Captain for delaying our departure. Anyway, let’s begin,” Sarah said and sat down.

Sarah tapped a few things on her tablet and then said, “Solana Gonzalez?”

“Yes?” Solana replied

Sarah looked up at her and smiled, “So, you’re our lucky winner? Congratulations. Let’s start with your age and where you were born. Also, your ethnicity if you know it.”

“I’m 20 years old and I was born in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina. I’m mostly Spanish and part Italian too.”

“Is that your baby?” Sarah asked.

“Yes! This is Carina Gonzalez. She is well, she was born this morning in Steamboat Springs,” Solana said.

“Oh! She was born this morning really? Are you feeling all right?”

“I don’t know, I’m aching and exhausted but I’m so happy to finally be here.”

“I understand. Well, I won’t keep you long so you can get some rest.”

“Thank you.”

“And your name is?” Sarah said looking at Skylar.

Skylar watched Solana and wondered how she felt about her baby being born in the United States when he realized Sarah was talking to him.

“Oh, you mean me? I’m Skylar Muller.”

“And your age, place of birth and ethnicity?”

“Right! I’m 22 years old. I was born in Interlaken, Switzerland but I grew up in Wengen. I’m German-Swiss.”

“OK good. Next,” Sarah said looking at Jayden.

“I’m Jayden Kovác, 20 years old. I was born in Cusco, Peru. Let’s see, my father was Hungarian and my mother was Peruvian. I guess technically my mother was Spanish.” Jayden said and shrugged.

Sarah looked up as soon as she was done tapping on the tablet and Shekinah began.

“I’m Shekinah Fernandez. I’m seventeen and was born in Cusco as well. I’m Spanish Peruvian.”

Skylar watched Sarah quickly tap on the tablet and enter the information.

“OK, young lady what is your name?” Sarah said and looked at Peggy.

“My name is Peggy Rainwater. I’m 12 and my brother Phil is eight years old. We were both born in Cherokee, North Carolina. And we are Cherokee. Isn’t that cool? Only our parents died in a car crash and we had to go live with Grandmother Rainwater in Alaska. We didn’t like it as first.”

“Thank you, Peggy. That is all I need,” Sarah said interrupting Peggy before she could continue.

Sarah tapped a few more things and waited a moment.

“It looks like you have brought quite a menagerie of animals and people for that matter! Let’s see, I’ll read the list and you let me know if they missed anything. So, listen carefully. We have three female red-tailed hawks, two male red-tailed hawks, two female criollo horses, two male criollo horses, one female tobiano paint horse, one female cougar and one male cougar. Is that correct for your animals?”

Solana nodded but looked at the others. Everyone nodded their agreement so she replied, “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Very good. Now, we have on file that you brought the following seeds: sunflower, grape, alfalfa, oat, tomato, sugarcane, apple, lettuce, carrots and squash. Is this correct?”

“Yes, I think that sounds right. Right, Peggy? You must have brought the lettuce, carrots and squash.” Solana said looking at Peggy.

“Yep!” Peggy replied.

“Excellent. We’re almost done. I just need to add up all your hierarchy points,” Sarah said and tapped quickly on her tablet.

“Wait! What about my mother? I forgot to give you her place of birth and age,” Solana said.

Sarah looked up at Solana, “Your mother? Is she here as well?”

“Yes, but they took her to sick bay.”

“Hmmm, this is a problem,” Sarah said as she tapped on her tablet. “You did read the rules before agreeing to them correct?”

“Yes, I read them.”

“Good, then you know each family can only be a maximum of seven people. And your mother will make that eight. I’m afraid you will have to choose only six people to go with you.”

“Wait, you’re serious! How will one person make a difference?” Solana asked.

“I’m sorry Solana. We can’t bend the rules for one person and not another. There are thirty families who would also like to bring many people and we don’t have the capacity.”

Skylar bellowed, “This is crazy! Are you seriously counting a newborn baby the same as an adult?”

There was no way they were going to choose someone to stay behind to what die? He understood strict rules but the little baby can’t possibly count for capacity issues.

“I can’t change the rules and the program counted the baby as part of the family. There is nothing I can do,” Sarah said.

Shekinah stood up and shouted, “Unbelievable! So, who is supposed to stay behind then? And what will you just throw them out to be eaten by those cattle!”

Jayden put a hand on Shekinah and said, “I’ll do it.”

Everyone turned to look at Jayden stunned.

Jayden continued solemnly, “I’ll stay behind and make my way back to Peru.”

Shekinah put Jayden’s hand in hers and begged, “No, no, no, Jayden you can’t. You’ll never make it. I’m not leaving you. I’m going with you if you do.”

Solana said, “No, no one is going anywhere I’ll talk to Captain Palmer and he will straighten this out.”

“I already summoned for him,” Sarah said and held her tablet up.

Just then the door opened and Joshua stepped inside the meeting room.

“What is the problem, Sarah?” Joshua asked.

Everyone except Peggy and Phil started speaking and shouting at once.

“Quiet!” Joshua’s voice boomed and they all instantly quieted.

“Good. Solana, you may speak.”

“Captain, my family has seven people except that my baby was born today. So now we have seven people plus my little baby girl. Please tell me there is room for all of us.”

“Please, everyone, sit down. These are very difficult times.”

“Solana,” whispered Peggy as tapped on her side while the Captain was talking.

“Not now Peggy,” Solana whispered back.

“And some hard decisions must be made by all of us. This is about the very survival of the human race. We can’t as a people continue to make the same mistakes that led us to these desperate times. We’re building a new society. One that will remain strong throughout the years. In order to do that, we must abide by our agreed upon rules and enforce them. When we start making exceptions to our beliefs we begin to fail ourselves. I’m sorry Solana, but we can’t change the rules to make a special exception no matter how much it hurts. Your family is free to go if you need to.”

“No,” Solana said sounding so heartbroken.

“Come, Sarah. Let us give them some time to talk it over.”

They got up to leave but Peggy stood up then.

“Wait, mister!” Peggy said then turned to her brother. “Tell them Phil, you need to tell them.”

“What is it, young man?” Joshua asked gently.

Phil stood up and said, “Does it help if I have a key too?”

Just about everyone in the room turned and said, “What?!” at the same time.

“Hold on, everyone. Phil, are you telling me you have one of our keys in your thumb nail?”

Phil nodded, “My foster dad made me do it! I think he was scared.”

Joshua pulled his scanner off his belt and walked over to Phil, “May I?”

Phil extended his thumb allowing Joshua to scan him.

“Interesting. Was Peter Ross your foster parent?”

Peggy replied, “Yes, he was and he won the lottery. He had your book too. But they died and we were all alone until Skylar came to save us.”

“So, you have no legal guardians?” Joshua asked Peggy.

“No, I guess not. Solana can take care of us now,” Peggy said and held on tightly to Solana’s arm.

“Is that correct Solana?” Joshua asked her.

“Yes of course! I owe them my life! We all do.”

“Sarah, this is unusual but given we have two lottery winners in the same family they would be entitled to two complete sets of provisions. This would include up to 14 people and two quarters.”

“Oh my god, so everyone can stay? Thank you so much!” Solana said with tears in her eyes. “You two are my biggest heros! Some day I’m going to make a big statue of you both!” Solana said and hugged Peggy and Phil.

“Sarah, can you add up their hierarchy points so we can get them to their quarters It’s been a very long day for them.”

“Yes, sir. I’m doing it now. There, all done. Wow, sir, with all their animals, seeds, ethnic diversity and having two families in one they are our highest-ranking family by quite a lot!”

“Excellent job Solana. I will personally escort you and your family to your quarters since we’re on the same ship,” Joshua said. “Let’s go get you settled in.”

They followed Joshua to his ship and walked up the ramp to board it. They weaved through hallways and through several doors. There were rooms in this hallway and Skylar heard dogs barking and other various animal sounds. Joshua opened one of the doors and stepped into a fairly large room with stalls. Skylar saw Solana's horses in straw-filled stalls of their own as they happily munched on grains. There was also several goats in a pen nearby. They didn't go in very far since the pumas were still closely following Solana and no one wanted to scare the animals.

Joshua said as he led them, "You can visit your animals anytime you wish and it's expected that you help care for them. But for now, let's get those cougars to their quarters."

"Where are the hawks?" Phil asked.

"I'll show you. But first let's take care of those cougars," Joshua said to Phil.

They continued down the hall and around a corner. Then Joshua stopped at one door and opened it. The room had one large enclosure in it. The cage had a tire swing in the center, two dishes full of raw meat and a large trough for water.

"I have to admit I was quite a surprised to see your cougars. Since they appear to be trained, the board of leaders decided they could prove useful and voted for them to stay. It also helps that no one brought in elephants so their cage is available. I had the crew place some food in a dish for them. Speaking of the leader's meeting reminds me, Solana, since

you are the highest-ranking family you will be granted a seat and vote in the leader's meetings as a representative of the families," Joshua said as he opened the cage door.

Skylar thought that was awesome about her getting to sit in on the leader's meetings but Solana seemed too tired to care and didn't even respond to that news. She walked into the cage and encouraged the pumas to follow her. They looked around then sniffed out the bowl of food and went closer to investigate. Soon they were both eating greedily.

"I'm having the construction crew create a den for them to sleep in. That should be done before the end of today."

Solana quietly walked out of the cage while the pumas were distracted. It seemed Solana was satisfied that her cats would be fine. Skylar had to admit he was exhausted and wanted to get somewhere he could eat and sleep.

They continued further and stopped by another door. Inside another room were cages for birds. Phil's hawks were in one cage and he saw pigeons in another cage nearby. They didn't stay long as Phil only nodded satisfied they were on the ship and safe.

"This ship is like Noah's ark," Skylar said.

Joshua replied, "True, except we aren't trying to save all of Earth's creatures as that would be impossible. So we voted on a selection of useful animals to bring with us."

“How long are we going to be on this ship,” Jayden asked as they left the area of animals and went up a stairway and past various rooms.

Joshua answered, “A few months, but wait for the meeting and it will all be explained.”

Skylar noticed a snack room, restrooms, showers and he then saw what looked like some kind of game room. Even though he was tired, Skylar wanted to check it out but the group kept moving. Then they climbed up a narrow spiral stairway and walked down a hall. They stopped at the end and Joshua opened a door to the left.

“Here we are, this and the next door down are both yours. In about an hour, there will be a meeting broadcast over your TVs with a chance for questions at the end. It will be started automatically for you. There are also instructions inside on how to operate the intercom system in case you need anything. I’ll have someone bring up a bassinet for your baby to sleep in Solana.”

“Thank you. Where is my mother, how is she doing?” Solana asked.

“She was still sleeping last I heard. We moved her to the sick bay on this ship. It’s down one level and toward the aft of the ship. There is a map in your quarters that shows you where everything is located. We will also offer tours once everyone is settled in. So please, make yourself comfortable. I must be going now,” Joshua said and left.

Skylar, was used to luxurious living at his father’s hotel so he wasn’t overly impressed but it was still fun to watch everyone’s reaction to their

quarters. There was a living room with two couches, coffee tables, electronic fireplace, and large screen TV. They also had a small kitchen, which everyone quickly raided and found various snacks. They made quick work of their snacks. They also had four bedrooms and a bathroom with a bathtub and shower. He thought that shower room he saw earlier must be for the crew. There were also small windows one in each bedroom and two in the living room. Skylar glanced out and saw that most of the people were already on board one ship or another. Both of the quarters were basically the same except some variation in the decorations. Shekinah and Jayden chose bedrooms in the second room. Solana quickly picked a bedroom with a double bed in the first quarters. Carina has started to fuss so she went to her room and closed the door. Skylar figured she was going to feed her baby. Peggy and Phil picked rooms in Solana's quarters. So, since Esperanza will take the last bedroom left in Solana's quarter. Skylar went to the second quarters and found a nice bedroom with a double bed as well and flopped down on the bed. He closed his eyes to rest a bit.

Chapter 29

Solana awoke to the sound of the TV in her room sounding a pleasant beeping notification. Earlier she had laid down on the double bed next to her baby while Carina suckled on her breast. She was too tired to sit up any longer. Carina must have finished eating and let go since she lay there peacefully sleeping. She was such a good baby but Solana also knew from reading and listening to her mother that newborns always slept a lot the first few days. Then the real challenge begins so she should get her rest now. It seemed like she might finally get some rest thanks to the Teal Haven project. A pleasant looking young woman with short blonde hair came onto the screen. She was wearing an officer's uniform similar to Joshua only with less insignia.

A woman on the TV began to speak, "Welcome to Project Teal Haven. Let me first say to please hold all questions until the end. When we open for questions, you can use your remote to signal that you have a question. A green light will indicate it is your turn to ask your question. Simply speak into your remote and everyone attending the meeting will hear you."

"My name is Shannon Reese and I'm the Human Relations Commander. That means I am in charge of making sure everyone understands their role and the rules they need to follow among many more responsibilities. I won't bore you today with reading the rules as they are all

listed in your family's book. Instead I want to share with you what the Teal Haven Project really is and what your part in this project will be. Teal Haven was founded by United States government ten years ago when US scientists and the Intelligence Agency realized that Earth was likely to go through major changes that would not be favorable for human life. Since that day, they worked at a furious pace to prepare for this day. The day when humans would leave Earth to seek out a new home."

There was a pause and the screen switched to a constellation, which Solana was surprised to see was the constellation Carina. She could hardly believe they were leaving Earth! There is no dome or underground shelter after all. She never even thought of that as a possibility. But it made sense since she remembered Shane saying it could take thousands of years or more for Earth to recover. For them to hide in a shelter for such a long time didn't seem possible.

"After many years of searching for a habitable planet, which began long before this project, we have found a near perfect Earth-like match in the southern constellation known as Carina. This system is located approximately twelve-thousand light years away with a main sequence yellow star like our sun and a rocky planet that is 6% larger than Earth. Its atmosphere matches our own to ninety-eight percent certainty. These differences are negligible and should not cause anyone concern. Many of you might know, while planets capable of harboring life are common finding

an Earth twin was an exhausting search with many close fits but none came so close as the planet in Carina."

"I see many of you have question already. Please, hold your questions until the presentation is complete as I am sure it will answer many of your questions."

The screen switched to an image of the five ships orbiting Earth. They arranged themselves with four of them forming a rectangular pattern and one centered above the rest creating a pyramid shape.

"One of the keys of our success is a group of elite scientists that have joined the project. They have found a way to apply the transprinter technology to our ships. This will enable us to teleport to our destination, twelve-thousand light years away in seconds. While, we have tested this extensively with 100% success rate, this was only done with prototypes. As we didn't have time to build full-sized models for testing, there will be some risk involved. We believe the risk is very low and have decided not to delay any further as the situation on Earth is rapidly deteriorating."

While she talked, the image showed the ships beaming lights of energy to each other, which grew in brightness. Then they were gone. After a moment the ships reappeared next to a blue planet with different land patterns than Earth. Solana assumed the images were computer simulated since she figured they didn't have the technology to photograph planets that far away. Solana knew planet science was incredibly good and they had

ways of knowing details about planets so far away. It all barely seemed possible to her.

Shannon continued, “Once we arrive at our new planet, we cannot just land on the surface and build our new home. There will be many dangers, one of which is microbiology. Therefore, we will require several months in orbit. During this time, our main purpose will be to develop the vaccines necessary for us to survive. We must be very patient with this phase in order to ensure our survival. Keep in mind, this also includes vaccine’s for our animals. We will also be sending down data collecting probes and later small teams of specialists on short missions. Some of these missions will include scouting for our home base location. Other missions will be to assess dangers from the local fauna and flora. I will keep everyone informed on our progress. As soon as a home base is established and deemed safe, then we can begin moving into our new home.”

Shannon paused a moment to let all of that sink in, “Your role as families is a very important one. First, you must care for your animal’s welfare and propagation. The expectations regarding your animals is also detailed in your family book. You will have training videos, veterinarians and animal scientists available to help with your animals. Second, you will be highly encouraged and rewarded for having children of your own. After all, without children we cannot survive. It was decided the seeds and plants brought by each family will be handled by our team of agricultural scientists so you don’t need to worry about that. However, once we are established on

the surface, extra seeds will be available for families wishing to pursue gardening."

Shannon paused again and said, "This concludes our first meeting. We will have many more to come. At this time, we will open the lines for questions."

Solana was wondering what to ask when Shannon said, "Go ahead with your question,"

A male voice was heard saying, "If Teal Haven began ten years ago, why did you wait so long to create the lottery?"

"Good question. First, Teal Haven had gathered what we call the crew. The crew is made up of leaders, soldiers, scientists and specialists needed for our survival. The crew is about 80% of the people. The other 20% were to be civilian families. The roster was quickly filled early on in the project. However, over time natural disasters and disease took its toll and opened up vacancies. It was Captain Palmer who came up with the idea of a lottery. We also wanted to ensure a large and diverse collection of human DNA so we made sure there were winners from each region of the globe."

Shannon paused, "Go ahead with your question."

A woman's voice said, "Why did we need to bring animals and seeds?"

"There are two reasons. Our team of psychologists believed having familiar animals and plants will help ease our transition and ability to acclimate to the new planet. As you can image it is going to be very difficult to start in a place where nothing is known to us. Our food supply, the plant

life and animals surrounding us will all be very strange. Reason two, was a test of the winning families. We wanted to be sure the people we take with us are capable of contributing to our society. This is going to be crucial for our survival."

"Any more questions?" Shannon said after waiting a moment. "Yes, go ahead."

"When can we meet the crew and the other families?" a male voice asked.

"Very soon after we reach our destination we will be holding a meet and greet ball in the commons room on ship one. There was a packet of information left in each of your quarters, that includes a map of the ships. It also includes an itinerary for the first month of events. We will be forming some groups and one of these groups will be a social group that will be in charge of planning social events. I look forward to what plans will be made after our first month in orbit."

"We have time for two more questions," Shannon said.

A male voice asked, "You mentioned we will orbit for several months. Can you be more specific?"

"No, I'm afraid not. This is due to the unknown nature of the microbiology on our new planet. In some cases, we might need a series of shots given over time to be effective. I have been told a minimum of three months to a maximum of two years is possible. However, before you panic it

is highly unlikely we will need the maximum. Each and every one of us will be just as anxious to begin our new life."

"One last question," Shannon said.

Solana had come up with a question earlier and didn't think she was going to get through when the light on her remote turned green indicating her question was chosen and her remote's mic was live!

Solana spoke into her remote, "What happens if we find other intelligent beings already living there?"

"This is a great question. First let me answer it by saying, when we searched for a habitable planet we also searched for any signs of unnatural signals like radio waves. The presence of these signals would indicate a more advanced civilization inhabiting the planet. Our planet has no such signals, however that does not preclude the possibility of a more primitive yet intelligent species occupying the planet. If this happens to be the case, our plans will be to peacefully cohabitate if at all possible. But make no mistake, our top priority will be the survival of the human race."

Shannon paused before continuing, "At this time, take notice of the yes and no buttons on your remotes. Do not press them yet. First, each of the families can choose if they wish to stay with the Teal Haven project by pressing yes. Or by pressing no, this will indicate your family wishes to be left behind. There is no penalty for choosing to leave the project. Your family will simply be escorted off the ship. You are free to stay in the hangar as it will be abandoned. However, there are no supplies left behind. Please

choose one representative from each family to press the yes or no button at this time."

Solana, sat for a moment and wondered if she should go get the others. However, she heard a door opening and a few seconds later a knock came at her door.

"Solana?" Shekinah asked.

"Come in."

Shekinah opened the door and Jayden and Skylar were behind her.

"We all want to stay." Shekinah said as they all came into her bedroom.

"Yes, I completely agree! I will press yes then," Solana replied and pressed the yes button. "What do you think of all of this? Isn't it exciting that we're going to travel to another planet!" Solana said enthusiastically.

Skylar replied, "Well, I'm relieved we're not going to be stuck in some underground shelter for the rest of our lives."

Shannon came back on the air, "I'm pleased to announce that everyone has voted to stay. At this time, please stay seated as the ships will be lifting off. It should be quite smooth but we prefer to take precautions. And no need to watch out the windows, we will be broadcasting over the TVs from different cameras."

The TV switched to a camera showing the outside of the ships.

"Quick, let's all move to the living room," Jayden said as they felt the ship engines begin to rumble.

“I’ll get Peggy and Phil,” Shekinah said and dashed out of the room.

Solana picked up Carina and followed Jayden and Skylar to the living room.

Solana felt the ship move, “Whoa,” she said as the floor tilted slightly.

“This is exciting!” Jayden said as he sat down on a couch.

“What’s going on?” Peggy asked rubbing sleep from her eyes. Phil followed close behind.

Solana sat on the couch before she could lose her balance. Skylar grabbed the remote and quickly sat by Solana before Peggy and Phil could grab the spot. Peggy sat down by Solana which left no room for Phil.

“Come sit by me,” Shekinah said and patted the couch.

Phil went over and sat by her but kept some space. With everyone settled in, they watched the TV screen. Since it seemed Peggy and Phil slept through the meeting, Solana told them they were taking off and going to another planet. They seemed excited about the idea as well. They had already left the hangar and the other ships were close behind. Soon they felt acceleration as the ships sped across the land. After watching a while, they realized the ships were spiraling higher and higher into the Earth’s atmosphere. It wouldn’t take long before they would be leaving Earth forever.

Phil asked, “Will we get to float when we reach outer space? Like in those old movies?”

Skylar chuckled and smiled, “I wish! No, they have man-made gravity now, but that would be cool.”

Everyone quietly watched at that point. She thought everyone was still so exhausted and a little sad at the thought of never seeing Earth again. The thought was so unreal. Suddenly, she wished she had more pictures to remember Earth. Certainly, they would have brought that kind of stuff with them. There were a lot of scientists as part of the crew after all. Soon they were so high above Earth they could easily see the curvature of the planet. It really was a beautiful planet. It was sad they could no longer survive on Earth.

Solana felt the engine noise lessen as the ships maneuvered into the formation of the transprinter pyramid. When she remembered the pain of getting the key in her thumb Solana started to be scared.

“Do you think it will hurt?” Solana asked and regretted it when she saw everyone’s face.

“No, uh I really hope not! Why?” Skylar asked.

“Never mind. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Once the ships were in position they heard the ship’s engine getting louder but they remained stationary. Bright beams of light burst from the four ships and created the rectangle on the bottom of the pyramid shape. Then all four ships sent beams of light to the fifth ship at the apex of the pyramid. The engines roared even louder and the ship vibrated as the light grew brighter. Solana looked at the others and saw they looked nervous as

well. The vibrations grew in strength and Skylar gripped Solana's hand. Solana looked over and he smiled at her as if everything was going to be fine.

Solana looked back at the TV and saw the light was almost too bright to see anything else. Then she saw the fifth ship explode and the screen went dark. The power went off and they sat in the dark silence.

"What just happened?" Jayden said breaking the silence.

Solana exclaimed, "Oh my god, did you see that ship explode?"

Everyone got up to look out a window. All they saw was darkness so they moved to another window.

"Look, there are the other ships," Skylar said.

"One is missing!" Shekinah said.

"Guys, I don't see any planet," Jayden said.

Just then the power was restored and the TV came back on. Everyone hurried back to their seats. Shannon was on the TV screen but looked to be talking with someone. Then she turned her attention to the camera.

"At this time, we ask that everyone remain calm. As I'm sure everyone saw, there has been an unfortunate accident," Shannon paused and held in a clear desire to cry. Then she continued, "We need to access the situation and will be reporting shortly. We ask that everyone remain in their quarters and please be patient."

The TV broadcast turned off.

Jayden gasped, "Oh, we are so screwed!"

Solana replied, “We don’t know that Jayden. Let’s give them some time and try not think about it, OK?”

Shekinah got up, “Is anyone hungry because I’m starved!”

Solana realized she was hungry and got up to follow Shekinah to the kitchen, “Good idea Shekinah.”

Everyone went to the kitchen and found something to eat and drink. They ate quietly since no one wanted to talk about the possibility that they were lost in space. As they ate, the TV came back on. Everyone quickly took their seats on the couch to listen.

Shannon came back on the TV screen, “As many of you may have noticed, we did not arrive at our planned destination. Also, without the fifth apex ship we cannot reactivate the teleportation. However, all is not lost. Our scientists have determined our current location and miraculously we’re in close vicinity to another habitable planet. The bad news is this planet orbits a dimmer class M red dwarf star and the planet is tidally locked. This means that while we might be able survive on this planet, it will not be a good home for us. A tidally locked planet does not rotate relative to the star so that one side is always facing the star making it very hot on one side and very cold on the dark side. This planet, is actually in a 3:2 spin-orbit resonance similar to Mercury which means it does turn relative to the star but very slowly making for long hot days and long cold nights. Our current plan will be to use this planet as a temporary home until we can rebuild the apex ship. Then, we will continue as planned to our preferred planet. Please

hold your questions as I don’t know any more. We will be sharing more details as soon as we know it. At this point, everyone is free to move about your ship.”

Chapter 30

Wednesday November 9th

Dear Diary,

They say we will be going down to the planet soon. People are calling it Planet Quagmire because it's all swampy. Except, they say at night the water freezes. So maybe I will get to ice skate. They say the nights are very long and last forty-two Earth-days kind of like some parts of Alaska. Oh and there are two moons! One is smaller than the other one but they look a lot like Earth's moon.

I like the being on the ship but there is nothing left to explore. All the ships docked together with tunnels between them. It took me and Phil a while to explore them all. Once we got lost but a nice man in a uniform helped us find our way back home. Anyway, I can't wait until we get to land on the planet. Solana told me her horse is going to have a baby and when it's born it will be mine! I can hardly believe I will have a horse of my very own! She is so nice to me. I asked her to be my mom and she said she would for as long as I wanted her to be. It feels really good to have a family that loves me. Even her mom is nice to me but she makes me and Phil take baths all the time. Well, I have to go. I promised Phil I would play video games with him.

Peggy

*** Section Break ***

Skylar stared out the window of his bedroom at the planet below them. Planet Quagmire they called it. Who called it that he wasn't sure but he thought they should give it a better name. Maybe once they live on it a while they will think of something better. They were supposed to have a naming contest but it never happened. He figured it never happened because the contest was intended name their original destination and not this planet.

Skylar couldn't believe he had over a hundred different vaccines already. Thankfully, they said that should be the last of them. He didn't even want to think about starting that process over again when they finally arrive at their real home planet. He overheard scientist squabbling about how to recycle the syringes because they weren't going to have enough. Skylar wondered if maybe they should call this planet home and not try to leave. Especially, after losing so many people. Skylar looked back out the window. The sun was a reddish-orange color, which made it always seem like dusk. Skylar thought it didn't look too bad except it was always covered in clouds on the day side. The scientists said there were less clouds at night

but it was too dark to see clouds or land from the ship. The pictures showed a swampy landscape with strange black plants that looked like fur-covered bamboo. Most of the leaves in the pictures were black but there were other colors like red and green mixed in as well. They also had pictures of a small rodent-like furry animal with large front claws. They say it burrows underground during the long nights.

Skylar tried to get on a team to go down to the planet but he had no science degree. They didn't really give him much of a chance at that point. He was sick of the limited video games they had available and the social balls were a bore. Actually, he would have enjoyed them very much if Solana would go with him. But she was always too tired or too busy with Carina. She seemed to like him though and he thought she seemed sincere about being too tired. He knew young babies were a lot of work and kept you up all night so he decided he would wait and keep asking. His patience paid off and she finally agreed to go with him to the next social ball. He was excited about their first real date. He thought he better clean up and get ready since it was almost time.

He had a suit made just for the occasion. Skylar was impressed that they had thought of bringing a whole team of tailors. But when he thought of it, it made sense. Their clothes would wear out and then who would make new clothes for them. They told him the suit was free for now but once they were more established a monetary system would be used. Skylar thought that Solana might end up breeding and selling horses for a living. He

thought that could be fun so he started watching videos to learn more about horses. He also wanted to be a useful family member and he especially wanted to impress Solana.

*** Section Break***

“Here let me braid your hair,” Esperanza said.

“Thanks mama.”

“You look beautiful in your dress. Do you like it?”

“Yes, I love it. Thank you for having it made for me. It’s such a pretty sparkly-blue dress. Are you sure it isn’t too much?”

“Oh no, everyone dresses formal for the balls. Besides, I think it is about time you go out with the boy. He has been waiting for you all this time yet there are plenty of other pretty girls.”

“Oh mama! You know I couldn’t leave Carina when she was so young. Besides, your arm needed to heal.”

“Those are just excuses. There your hair is all done. Now go and have some fun. And don’t worry about Carina, when she wakes up from her nap we’re going to watch cartoons with Peggy and Phil.”

“Thank you, mama,” Solana said smiling.

A knock was at the door and butterflies swirled in Solana’s stomach.

“Go on then,” Esperanza said and headed off to check on Carina.

Solana opened the door and gasped at how handsome Skylar looked in his suit.

“You are so beautiful Solana.”

“Thank you,” Solana replied and smiled brightly.

“Shall we go to the ball?” Skylar said as he offered his arm for her to take.

The ballroom was cheerfully decorated in balloons and streamers. It was already quite crowded with all sorts of folk. Some of the people were clearly crewman wearing various formal uniforms. Everyone seemed to be having a great time as they drank, ate and danced. A rock band was playing a medieval Celtic rock song, which sounded very cool to Solana.

“Would you like a drink?” Skylar asked.

“Sure!”

Skylar led her to the bar, “I’d like a beer. And m ’lady?”

“I’d like a beer as well, thank you.”

Skylar found a table near the dance floor and pulled a chair for Solana. Then sat down next to her.

“Are you excited about finally going down to the planet?” Skylar asked.

“Oh, yes! I’m tired of being on this ship. But, it doesn’t sound very nice with all the swampland.”

“True, but some fresh air would be nice. And I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“I want to help out more with the horses and I was hoping you could teach me.”

“I’d love to! I didn’t know you were interested or I would have shown you some things sooner.”

“Great! So, you’ll teach me then,” Skylar said sounding relieved.

“Of course, Skylar, I’d love to have your help. If you want, we can start tomorrow.”

“That would be awesome. Hey, would you like to dance, this song is rocking,” Skylar asked.

“Sure!”

Solana was surprised at how well Skylar could fast dance. She felt happy and enjoyed the song and dance. After the song finished another rock song came on and they decided to stay out and dance some more. When yet another rock song started they decided to go back to the table for a drink.

“This is fun! Thanks for asking me out Skylar.”

“I agree, this is the most fun I’ve had since we got on these ships!”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I like you a lot Solana.”

“I like you too,” Solana said and took a drink of her beer.

“So when we get to the planet, it would be really cool if we could go horseback riding together,” Skylar said and smiled at Solana.

“I’d like that Skylar but we may need to be careful until we know where we can ride safely. As you know, I’m in the leader’s meetings now. While they are mostly boring, I do get to learn some secret things.”

“Like what?” Skylar asked and scooted his chair closer.

“Well, I’m not allowed to talk about it but, I think I can trust you.”

“You can trust me Solana. I won’t tell anyone,” Skylar said as he gently put his hand in hers and leaned in closer.

Solana felt a spark of excitement as she held Skylar’s hand and being so close to him. She glanced at his lips and wondered if he might kiss her but he just waited for her to explain. Solana glanced away a second to regain her thoughts and began, “One of the scouting parties was attacked by some creatures and none of them survived. They think it was something in the water but it happened too fast to get any photos.”

“Oh god, that’s terrible.”

“I know! I thought the same thing, but they said it was close to the North pole. They thought it would be better to live near the poles since the sunlight is more stable. That is until the attack happened.”

“I can see why they wouldn’t want that getting out.”

“Yeah, I agree. They do plan to let everyone know once they know more about what happened. Anyway, that’s why I say we need to be careful.”

“So, where are we landing then? Do you know?”

“Yes, they found an area of dry land near an ancient volcano. The volcano looks like a large rounded mountain in the background of the picture I saw. They plan to setup a base in a large field of in front of the volcano. It looks very nice with tall dark green grass and all sorts of wild flowers,” Solana said excitedly.

“That does sound good. Although I think I will always miss the Swiss Alps.”

“Oh, yeah sorry. Maybe there will be tall mountains on the next planet.”

“True, maybe there will be,” Skylar said and took a long drink of his beer.

Solana did the same savoring the taste of her cold beer. The band started playing a slow song and Solana glanced at Skylar wondering if he wanted dance again.

As if reading her mind Skylar asked, “Care to dance?”

“I’d love to,” Solana replied smiling.

Skylar led her out to the dance floor and took her in his arms. He seemed to know how to slow dance with no hesitation and led her as they swirled about the dance floor. After a short while, he pulled her in closer to him.

“I have liked you since the moment I saw you. You are so incredibly beautiful Solana.”

Solana smiled blushing, “I like –”

Skylar didn’t let her finish cutting her off with a soft kiss.

Solana looked up as Skylar withdrew from the gentle kiss. He had taken her breathe away and all she could think of now was kissing him again. He took one look at her eyes and kissed her again. They kissed passionately and held each other so tightly they forgot to dance. Soon the song was over so they pulled away and went back to their table holding hands. Solana was felt so happy. Then for a moment she felt bad for dodging his requests for so long.

“Skylar, I’m sorry I didn’t go out with you sooner.”

Skylar gently put a finger on her mouth, “It’s fine, I understand,” and then gave her a quick kiss. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

“What, right now?”

“Yep, come on. You’ll see.”

Skylar led Solana through the winding halls and stairways of several ships and Solana was dying of curiosity as to where they were going. Finally, they came to a doorway and Skylar opened it. Inside was a medium-sized room with a large viewing window covering the wall. The view of the reddish-orange tinted planet below them was incredible.

“Oh, it’s amazing! Skylar, how did you find this place?”

“I spent a lot of time walking around.”

Solana looked around the room and noticed there were many books on shelves and several couches and tables.

“It’s a library,” Skylar said.

“I see that. It’s really cool.”

“I thought you might like it here,” Skylar said smiling.

Skylar took her hand and led her to a double chaise lounge in front of the large window. They laid down on the lounge and gazed at planet below. It was going to be their home for a while. She thought everything was going to be all right, especially, with Skylar by her side.

“It really is beautiful isn’t it?” Solana asked.

“Yes, you are.”

Solana turned to see him looking at her and smiled. Skylar moved in closer and they kissed.